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THE LEGACY OF THE CONTROVERSIES

The Continuing Impact on Interfaith Encounters in Sri Lanka
of Nineteenth-Century Controversies between Buddhists and Christians

A DISSERTATION

Submitted for the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

MICHAEL SOLOMON VASANTHAKUMAR

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ABSTRACT

The Buddhist-Christian encounter of the late nineteenth-century Sri Lanka was an important episode in the history of the country. The nineteenth-century Christian missionaries who were influenced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment legacy forced the Buddhist monks to engage in debates with them on the relative merits of both religions with the view to demonstrating the superiority and authenticity of their religion and Christianising Sri Lanka. However, it became counterproductive and inspired a revival in Buddhism instead of winning Buddhists to Christianity. The outcome of those controversies still affects the Buddhist-Christian relationship in Sri Lanka. Since the major hindrance to the harmonious co-existence of the Buddhist and Christian communities was the continuing impact of the nineteenth-century controversies, this dissertation makes an attempt to discover the causes, origin, and consequences of those controversies, and to analyse them in order to trace its legacy and impact on the development of both religious communities and their faith to the present day.

In Chapter One, the British missionaries' encounters with the Buddhists are described in order to highlight the dramatic changes that took place in the Buddhist attitude towards Christianity. The inclusive and tolerant spirit of the Buddhists was provoked to such an extent that they abandoned their traditional approach to other religions and adopted the methodology of the missionaries in condemning Christianity and eventually met the Christians in public debates. A critical analysis of the subjects that were debated in the controversies is given in the second chapter. Each party criticised and ridiculed their opponent's religions. Both parties used their intellectual skills and religious knowledge to demonstrate that their religion was superior and authentic.

The Buddhists with their oratorical skills and knowledge of Western biblical criticism defeated the Christians in the public debates. Since this victory gave tremendous confidence and enthusiasm to the Buddhists, they began to revive and reform their religion by utilising the methods used by the Christian missionaries while undermining Christian faith and mission. This development in Buddhism is analysed in the third chapter. In the fourth chapter, the contemporary Buddhist attitude towards Christian doctrines and mission is analysed since the nineteenth-century controversies conditioned the Buddhist perception of Christianity even to the present day. The dissertation concludes by reflecting on the controversies and their continuing impact upon contemporary Buddhist-Christian relationship in Sri Lanka and recommending a context-sensitive attitude and approach in contemporary interfaith encounters.

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The librarians of the following institutions are remembered and appreciated for their kindness in helping me to get the materials I needed for this research. All Nations Christian College (Ware), School of Oriental and African Studies (London), The British Library (London), Lanka Bible College (Peradeniya), The Library of the University of Peradeniya (Sri Lanka), International Centre for Ethnic Studies (Kandy), Theological College of Lanka (Pilimalawala) and the Methodist Church Headquarters (Colombo). A sincere word of thanks also to Dr. Elizabeth J.Harris for giving me a copy of her doctoral dissertation to be used in this research.

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INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONTROVERSIES

Christian mission for the last two centuries has adopted various methodologies and formulated diverse theologies in spreading its beliefs and practices throughout the world. While many missionaries have succeeded in their ardent efforts to Christianise far-flung corners of the world, certain methodologies adopted by some of them have often damaged their cause more than furthering it. One such example is found in a series of controversies which took place between Buddhists and Christians in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. These controversies consisted of many confrontations between the Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries or ministers culminating in five major memorable public debates in which both religious spokesmen challenged each other in face-to-face confrontations in order to defend and assert the superiority and authenticity of their respective religions. These debates, as well as the entire controversies, did nothing to further the objectives of the missionaries who initiated them, but became counterproductive and inspired a revival in Buddhism instead of converting the Buddhists to Christianity as expected by the Christians. Further, the debates and the activities of the Christians of that century remain today an unhappy chapter, firmly embedded in the collective memory of modern Sri Lankan Buddhists, illustrating Christian arrogance and its callous castigation of Buddhism. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that what the Crusades have ultimately done to the modern Islamic response to Christianity has also been done to Sri Lankan Buddhists by the missionary castigation of Buddhism, and especially by these historic debates.

Sri Lankan Buddhists, past and present, regard these debates as highly significant events in

their religious history.¹ For instance, the often-quoted famous debate held at Panadura in August 1873 has been considered as “the Debate of the Century”² and “the Great Debate” between Buddhism and Christianity in the country.³ In fact, all five debates are popularly known among contemporary Buddhists as *Pancha Maha Vadaya*, the five great debates. The Panadura debate became “a landmark in Buddhist-Christian relationship in the island,”⁴ for “this debate marked the culmination of the process of inter-religious encounter that went back to the very arrival of Christianity in the island.”⁵ The consequences of these controversies were far reaching and the conclusions of these public debates have become paramount for the Buddhist claim that their religion is superior to Christianity.⁶

Although Richard F. Young and G.P.V.Somaratna have described these controversies as “Vain Debates”⁷ it can be said that they were ‘vain’ only to Christians who wanted somehow to demonstrate that their religion was superior and uniquely authentic in contrast with Buddhism and other non-Christian religions. As far as the Buddhists are concerned, the Panadura debate was a decisive and a momentous event in their 2500 years of religious and political history.⁸ Sri Lankan Buddhists consider this controversy to be “the fortunate event that saved Buddhism from being destroyed by the foreign missionaries backed by the then government.”⁹ Hence, for them, “it was an epoch-making event.”¹⁰ They see this

¹ They were held in the following locations: at Baddegama (12 miles from Galle) in 8 February 1864, at Waragoda (near Kelaniya) in August 1865, at Udanwita in 1 February 1866, at Gampola in 6, 9 and 10 January 1871, and at Panadura in 26 and 28 August 1873.

² N.Gunaratne & L.de Silva, “The Debate of the Century” in *Dialogue*, 1 (1973), p. 17.

³ All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) had published it as *The Great Debate Buddhism and Christianity Face to Face* in 1994.

⁴ C.W. Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*. Ilford: George Barmukacha, 1999, p. 125.

⁵ A.Thilekaratne, “Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka 1948-1998” in *Dialogue*, XXV-XXVI (1998/1999), p. 229.

⁶ Such views are taught in the schools, subjects like Buddhism, Social Studies and History create such attitudes in the minds of the Sinhalese students.

⁷ In fact they have dedicated their analysis of the controversies *The Vain Debates: Buddhist Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon* to “all those involved in the Buddhist-Christian controversies who in the end saw their vanity” (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996).

⁸ According to the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa*, Buddhism was introduced to the country in 250 BC. However, historians believe that “Buddhists and Buddhism come to the island much earlier than that” (K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.9).

⁹ N.Gunaratne & L.De Silva, “The Debate of the Century,” p. 17.

¹⁰ G.P.Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1973, p. 301.

debate as “a cornerstone of the modern society in which we live today”¹¹ and look back upon the Panadura debate as “a pivotal time in their history”¹² and proudly point out that, in that controversy, “the eloquent monk Mohottivatte (or Migettuvatte) Gunananda refuted the missionaries and defended Buddhism before an audience of ten thousand laymen.”¹³ Even Young and Somaratna admit that the Panadura debate “was regarded as such an epochal event in every respect.”¹⁴ The Buddhists point out that,

The controversy ended with victory for the Buddhists. The Buddhist orator not only replied effectively to the fallacies of the Christian speakers, but also enlightened them on the principles and tenets of the Buddhist doctrine. When the Christians retired from the debate defeated, the Buddhists were overjoyed. Festivities were held in every temple to mark their triumph and the effigy of Gunananda Thera was carried in procession in every village. The triumph of the Buddhists over their Christian adversaries at Panadura controversy flushed into their veins vigour and enthusiasm to work for the recovery of their glory.¹⁵

It seems very clear from the historical evidence that the Buddhist-Christian controversies, especially the Panadura debate, had far-reaching consequences. In fact, they gave much impetus to the nineteenth-century Buddhist revival.¹⁶ According to the Buddhists, the Panadura controversy “closed down a dark period in Lankan Buddhism and ushered in a new bright era.”¹⁷ At Panadura the Buddhists had “not only displayed most effectively their intellectual and polemical skills but also proved beyond doubt their ability to inspire and mobilise the Buddhist populace in confronting the advances of Christianity.”¹⁸ In fact, it had “proved a terrible blow to missionary work.”¹⁹ Although a contemporary Anglican Bishop, R.Copleston, thought it was an “ill judged... insignificant public controversy,” he

¹¹ T.Kariyawasam, “Foreword” in *Controversy at Panadura*. P.Abhayasundara, ed., Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1990, p.VIII.

¹² M.M.Ames, “Westernization or Modernization: The Case of the Sinhalese Buddhism” in *Social Compass*, XX (1973), p. 158.

¹³ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 231.

¹⁴ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 46.

¹⁵ H.R.Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1988, pp. 78-79.

¹⁶ More will be said on this in Chapter Three.

¹⁷ H.R.Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, p. 81.

¹⁸ K.N.O.Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhala Nationalism in Sri Lanka*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 103.

¹⁹ H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves III*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1880, p. 406.

later changed his opinion concerning its significance when he saw the tremendous influence it had on the Buddhist revival movement. Hence he wrote, "Buddhism as a whole is not conquered, or near it... There is little doubt that Buddhism is far more vigorous in Ceylon²⁰ than it was 150 years ago."²¹

In the 1860s, the technique of the public debate which the missionaries had used so effectively in the past only succeeded in providing Buddhist spokesmen with a platform for a vigorous re-assertion of the virtues of their own faith.²²

The controversies, then, gave new courage, direction and shape to Sri Lankan Buddhism. Christian doctrines and the activities of the missionaries came under severe criticism. Buddhism was revived, reformed, and was asserted to be the correct and noble path for attaining spiritual bliss and benefit. It is not an exaggeration to conclude that opposition to the Christian mission from the Buddhists was significantly heightened by the nineteenth-century controversies.

By the 1860s the Buddhist opposition to Christianity was much more self-confident and vocal than it had been before, and nothing illustrated the change in mood and tempo better than their response to challenges from missionaries to public debates.²³

Hence, it became "one of the symbolic climaxes of the resistance movement."²⁴ Gunananda became "the terror of the missionaries" and the "most brilliant and most powerful champion of Sinhalese Buddhism."²⁵

The famous religious debates of the nineteenth century served as the vocal outlets for Buddhists, who sought to assert their strength against the Christians. The Buddhist leaders used these debates as launching pads for their efforts to regain to the Buddhist fold those lost to the Christian minority. The main purpose of the so-called Buddhist [revival movement] was to prevent the further advancement of Christianity in Sri Lanka, while attention was directed to winning back those who had professed the Christian faith. This movement gradually moved towards violent outbursts against the

²⁰ Ceylon is the ancient name of Sri Lanka.

²¹ Quoted in K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, pp. 230,231.

²² K.M.De Silva, *A History of Sri-Lanka*, p. 340.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 340.

²⁴ S.Karunaratne, *Olcott's Contribution to the Buddhist Renaissance*. Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1980, p. III.

²⁵ Olcott's description about Gunananda, quoted in K.M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 341.

Christian minority. Sporadic attacks on Christian churches, dignitaries, and ordinary believers have been reported ever since the Panadura debate in 1873.²⁶

The Buddhist disdain for Christianity, which the nineteenth-century controversies did so much to shape, was not confined to that century only. There is a continuing contention between Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka. The controversies, especially the Panadura debate, have been popularised to such an extent that the majority of the contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhists question the value of Christianity as a religion worthy of following. In the subsequent century, the account of the Panadura controversy has been published several times,²⁷ is taught in schools, and serves as a frequent point in ongoing religious discussions. In August 1973, the centenary of the Panadura debate was celebrated "with great devotion and enthusiasm in several parts of the island."²⁸ The centenary of the death of Gunananda (1823-1890), the victorious Buddhist hero of the controversies, was also "celebrated with pomp and pageantry... [obtaining] the blessings of the highest authority of the country."²⁹ "The present Buddhist leaders look up to this era [i.e. the 19th century] with awe and respect. In fact some of those leaders [of the 19th century] who treated Christians with contempt have been treated in school textbooks as national heroes. This has had a serious impact on the minds of the younger generation that are taught to look upon the Christians as traitors."³⁰ Hence the legacy of the controversies continues to percolate through to the present century both as a rallying point for modern Sri Lankan Buddhism, and as a means of diluting the influence of the Christian church. The contemporary Buddhists are proud to point out:

The crumbling bastions of Christian dogmatic theology were reduced to a heap of smoking rubble... The Panadura controversy, which was intended to bring discredit to the Buddhists, sounded instead the death-knell of Christian influence in Ceylon, so

²⁶ R.de S. Ekanayake, *Human Rights and the Christian Community in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Christian Consultation of Sri Lanka, 1998, p. 16.

²⁷ It has been published in 1947, 1955, 1990 and 1994.

²⁸ N.Gunaratne & L.de Silva, "The Debate of the Century" p. 17.

²⁹ G.P.V.Somaratna, "Beleaguered Christianity in Sri Lanka" in *Asian Journal of Theology*. IX (April 1995), p. 50.

³⁰ R de S.Ekanayake, *Human Rights and the Christian Community*, p. 16.

that never again did Catholic or Protestant dogmatism venture to cross swords with Buddhist wisdom.³¹

The repercussions of the controversies can be witnessed in contemporary Sri Lanka. The leading figure of the nineteenth-century polemic, Anagarika Dharmapala, who was greatly influenced by the controversies, is one of the national heroes of modern Sri Lanka, and has been given prominence in contemporary Buddhist preaching and publications.

The anti-Christian activities were given a new face by the rise of Anagarika Dharmapala as the leader of Sinhalese Buddhism. His public speeches and writings against the Christians and other minorities created an atmosphere of hatred among the Buddhists.³²

The majority of the Buddhist in Sri Lanka consider Christianity as a dead religion of the past and Buddhism as the living religion of today. According to them "Christianity, or what remains of it, is fast dying... The Christian religion is dissolving before our eyes."³³ For them, the nineteenth-century controversies settled the religious issues concerning Buddhism and Christianity once and for all. In such a context, the Buddhists generally do not see any reason to renounce their highly valued religion and embrace a seemingly insignificant and inferior religion called Christianity. The work of Christian evangelists among Sri Lankan Buddhists nowadays thus encounters formidable opposition.

This dissertation will maintain that the continuing influence of the controversies remains a major obstacle to Christian mission in Sri Lanka. The legacy of the controversies indicates to the majority of the Buddhists that a serious consideration of Christianity and its teaching adds nothing to their spirituality. To them, the controversies have long since settled the issue of religious truth. Christian evangelistic activities are therefore opposed by the Buddhists. According to them contemporary conversions to Christianity "are not

³¹ Bhikshu Sangharakshita, *Anagarika Dharmapala: A Biographical Sketch*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1964, p.18.

³² R de S.Ekanayake, *Human Rights and the Christian Community*, p. 16.

³³ D.C.Wijayawardhana, *Revolt in the Temple*. Colombo: Sinah Publications, 1953, p.502.

conversions through conviction but through enticement with the offer of food shelter and clothing to the poverty-stricken.”³⁴ Hence they highlight the relevance of the nineteenth century controversies in the present context in this way:

Towards the end of the debate Gunananda Thera stated that the object of his engaging in the controversy was simply for the ascertainment of truth. He knew that Buddhism was true and he had come to defend it but he was not so prejudiced in its favour as not to be open to conviction and even to embrace Christianity if they were able to prove it to be true. Herein lies the relevance of the Panadura debate to the conversions that are taking place today and reported in the press.³⁵

According to Buddhists, contemporary conversions to Christianity are not impelled by religious convictions but by material considerations.³⁶ For the Buddhists, questions of religious truth had already been settled by the nineteenth-century controversies. The only ground left open for conversion, therefore, must by implication, be material advantage.

There is no doubt that the Panadura debate settled the religious issue for many Buddhists, serving as it does as the final authority in demonstrating the superiority and authenticity of their religion as against Christianity. The perceived success of the Panadura debate from the Buddhist point of view has led Nalin de Silva to suggest that the country needs a second Panadura debate to settle another vital issue that has plagued the country for some decades.³⁷ Referring to the ongoing debates concerning ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, conducted through the media, de Silva insists that a second Panadura debate is needed to conclude the debates on the ethnic issue.³⁸ It is clear from his words that, as the Panadura debate solved the religious issue, a second Panadura debate would bring an end to the ongoing dispute over the nature of the ethnic conflict. Hence he suggests:

It is becoming clear that these debates and discussions over the television and other

³⁴ H.P.Abeyasekera, *Some Colourful Cameos of Sri Lankan Life*. Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 1999, p. 103.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 103.

³⁶ More will be said about contemporary Buddhist view of Christian conversion in chapter four.

³⁷ N.de Silva, “A Second Panadura Debate Needed” in *The Island*, 3 March 1999, p. 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 16.

media are not going to achieve much as the spokespersons for Tamil racism continue with the same arguments even after they have been adequately dealt with. What we should now have is a debate extending over five days or so, somewhat along the lines of the Panadura debate, taking one question at a time. Any point raised should be argued until one party has no answer to offer.³⁹

It is clear then that the controversies, and especially the Panadura debate, are not just ancient episode in the historical records. They rather serve as a potent and present reminder to Buddhists of their victory and perceived superior status. Many Christians fail to realise this important reality. An inadequate understanding of the Buddhist perception of the Christian faith following the controversies has made it difficult for many Christians to relate to the Buddhists. Many are still guided by the mindset of the colonial era, and attribute all non-Christian religions and rites to diabolical sources. In the face of growing Buddhist criticism, however, other sections of the church tender blanket criticisms of missionary activity in the colonial and the present era, distancing themselves from, if not denouncing active Christian evangelistic activities. There is also a tendency to dissociate themselves, perhaps out of fear of Buddhist reaction, from the many new churches that continue to promote active and aggressive evangelism. In this complex context, a critical examination and evaluation of the controversies and its consequences is indispensable. It is hoped that the following effort will enable the modern Sri Lankan church to understand the historical roots that underlie the negative responses, and the indifferent if not antagonistic attitudes, Buddhists often display towards the Christian faith and church. It is also hoped that Christian missiologists of the future may find more constructive ways of relating to the Buddhists among whom they live.

Although there are some excellent studies on the relationship between the Buddhists and Christians during the British period, no attempt has been made to achieve the above stated objectives. The two excellent works by K.M.de Silva, *Buddhism and The British*

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 16.

*Government in Ceylon*⁴⁰ and *Social Policy and Missionary Organizations in Ceylon 1840-1855*⁴¹ analyse the interactions between the British Government, Christian missionaries and the Buddhists in the nineteenth century, but they do not cover the period of the controversies. Similarly, Barbara A.R. Coplans' *Methodism and Sinhalese Buddhism: The Wesleyan Methodist Encounter with Buddhism in Ceylon, 1814-1864*⁴² although it deals with the Christian missionary encounter with the Sri Lankan Buddhists, does not go beyond 1864. Although Charles W. Karunaratna's *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon*⁴³ covers the entire British period it is a historical survey and the controversies do not play a major part in his research. *The Roots of Nationalism: Sri Lanka* by Ananda Wickremaratne,⁴⁴ is also a study on the British and Christian dealings with the nineteenth-century Buddhists but its main concern is to trace the roots of the current nationalistic atmosphere of the country.

The most significant study of the British period of Sri Lanka in relation to Buddhism is Elizabeth J. Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion: The British Encounter with Buddhism in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka*,⁴⁵ which analyses in detail the nineteenth-century British conception of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Harris has surveyed not only the missionary understanding of Buddhism but her research covers all those who encountered Buddhism in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka, and provides a good background material. The present dissertation, however, focuses only on the missionary encounters with Buddhism. The major study on the controversies is Richard F. Young & G.P.V. Somaratna's *The Vain Debates: Buddhist Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon*,⁴⁶ but it is more sympathetic toward Christians and understandably avoids the nineteenth-century Buddhist

⁴⁰ This was published as the tenth volume of the *Ceylon Historical Journal*. (July 1960 – April 1961).

⁴¹ London: Longmans, & Greens Company, 1965.

⁴² Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Leeds: University of Leeds, 1980.

⁴³ Ilford: George Barmukacha, 1999.

⁴⁴ Colombo: Karunaratna & Sons, Year Not Mentioned.

⁴⁵ Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Kelaniya: Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, 1993.

⁴⁶ Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996.

revival which is an important subject to the present dissertation. This dissertation goes beyond the objectives of R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna's work to demonstrate that the debates were 'vain' only to the Christians but they were a 'gain' to the Buddhists. Kitsiri Malalgoda has also given a brief historical analytical survey of the controversies in an article "The Buddhist Christian Confrontation in Ceylon 1800-1880."⁴⁷ His standard work *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change*⁴⁸ provides an historical account of the development of Buddhism. In addition to this Richard Gombrich's *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*⁴⁹ has also been consulted. Tissa Kariyawasam's *Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition*⁵⁰ gives an excellent survey of the literature published in the nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. The nineteenth-century Buddhist revival and its development into the twentieth century is analysed in George D. Bond's *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition Reinterpretation and Response*.⁵¹ On the history of Sri Lanka, contemporary historian K.M.de Silva's *A History of Sri Lanka*⁵² is generally relied upon, although other historical works have also been consulted. Similarly, on the history of various Christian missionary organisations that worked in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka various historical accounts have been used in addition to James E.Tennent's *Christianity in Ceylon*,⁵³ and C.N.V.Fernando's *A study of the History of Christianity in Ceylon in the British Period from 1786-1903, with Special Reference to Protestant Missionaries*.⁵⁴ Since the Methodist missionaries were mainly involved in the controversies Robert Spence Hardy's *Jubilee Memorials of the Wesleyan Mission, South Ceylon, 1814-1864*⁵⁵ and Walter.J.T.Small's *A History of the Methodist Church in*

⁴⁷ *Social Compass*. XX (1973), pp. 171-200.

⁴⁸ Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

⁴⁹ London: Routledge, 1996.

⁵⁰ Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London: University of London, 1973.

⁵¹ Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992.

⁵² New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵³ The original 1850 edition is reprinted in New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1998.

⁵⁴ Unpublished B.Litt. Dissertation, Oxford: Keble College, 1942.

⁵⁵ Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1864.

*Ceylon*⁵⁶ were also used as historical sources. The text of the controversies comes from T.S.Dharmabandu's (ed.) *Pancha Maha Vadaya*.⁵⁷ For the Panadura debate P.Abhayasundara's (ed.) *Controversy at Panadura*⁵⁸ is used. Apart from these and the works cited in the footnotes, the materials kept at the Methodist Missionary Society's archives in London and Colombo and the reports of the Baptist Missionary Society as well as contemporary Sri Lankan newspapers were also consulted to construct the narrative parts of this dissertation.⁵⁹

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter concentrates on the causes and the origins of the controversies. The following chapter deals with the arguments presented by the Buddhists and Christians in these controversies, and a critical evaluation of the controversies is made in view of contemporary Christian mission in Sri Lanka. The third chapter deals with the consequences of the controversies in relation to the Buddhist revival and its adaptation of several missionary methodologies and even their teachings. The final chapter traces the continuing impact of the controversies in which Buddhist attitudes toward Christian doctrines and evangelism are analysed. This dissertation concludes by giving a Christian reflection upon the controversies in the light of Buddhist-Christian relationships and Christian mission in contemporary Sri Lanka.

⁵⁶ Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1971.

⁵⁷ Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., 1992

⁵⁸ Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1990.

⁵⁹ References are made to these materials in the footnotes whenever they are cited.

THE CAUSES AND THE ORIGIN OF THE CONTROVERSIES

Protestant missionaries of various Christian denominations were active in Sri Lanka when the British were ruling the country, for the government was favourable to Christian missionary enterprise.¹ Even though initially the British East India Company was hostile to the activities of the missionary organisations because of fears that Christian propaganda would disturb its trade, in 1799, three years after British occupation of the Maritime Provinces, the British Governor Frederick North² issued an historic edict defining the British policy of toleration towards Christians and non-Christians alike.³ Hence, the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Roman Catholics were given freedom in religious matters,⁴ which was denied to them under the previous colonial rule.⁵

In this chapter, activities of the Protestant missionaries will be surveyed, in order to trace the path that ultimately led to their public confrontation with the Buddhists and the growing opposition to their mission in Sri Lanka. During the first three years of British

¹ The Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka that were under the control of the Dutch East India Company passed into the possession of the British East India Company on 16 February 1796. Subsequently, when the central Kandyan Kingdom was ceded to the British in 1815, they became the sole rulers of the whole island (Cf. K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 210-235).

² Frederic North assumed office on 12 October 1798.

³ Cf. G.C.Mendis, ed. *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers Volume II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 161.

⁴ Frederic North was greatly interested in the moral and spiritual improvement of the people of Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, he was unable to do as much as he wished, for his term of office ended in 1805. North's successor Thomas Maitland, however, had no special enthusiasm for the propagation of Christianity. During the administration of Robert Brownrigg (who assumed office in 1812) missionary organisations flourished in Sri Lanka. He made every endeavour to aid the work of missionary organisations. Brownrigg's successor (from 1824 onwards), though he disapproved of the American mission, nevertheless supported the British missionary societies (Cf. C.N.V.Fernando, *A Study of the History of Christianity in Ceylon in the British Period*. Oxford: Keble College, 1942, pp. 35-36, 113-115).

⁵ Prior to the British rule the Portuguese as well as the Dutch had allowed the people to practise only their form of Christianity in the areas under their control.

rule, virtually nothing had been done to promote the cause of Christianity.⁶ Initial missionary involvement came in the shape of a few individual clergymen who came to Sri Lanka as company chaplains.⁷ Later, five missionary organisations from England and one from America commenced their ministry in the island, beginning in 1805 with the arrival of four missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS).⁸ In their wake came the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in 1812, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS)⁹ in 1814, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1818, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1840. In addition to these groups, missionaries sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions came to Sri Lanka in 1816. Of these six groups of missionaries, that of the London Missionary Society did not expand beyond the original four who arrived in 1805. The American missionaries were confined to the northernmost part of Sri Lanka. The other four organisations, however, founded several missionary stations in the western, southern and the central regions (as well as in other parts) of the country where they had several encounters with the Buddhists.

All missionaries, despite their denominational differences, were “welcomed and encouraged by the colonial authorities, and by a mutual agreement the various districts of the island were appropriated by each as the future scene of their labours.”¹⁰ The Baptists established their headquarters in Colombo (in 1812), and, from there, they gradually

⁶ J.Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon*. Dehiwela: Tisara Prakasakayo, (Reprint of 1807 Edition), 1983. p. 94.

⁷ The first clergyman to come from England was James Cordiner in 1799. The arrival of J.T.Twisleton in 1804 resulted in the termination of Cordiner's service in Sri Lanka who returned to England in February 1805 from Madras (*Ibid.* p.vii-x). Until 1805 the four missionaries of the London Missionary Society came to Sri-Lanka “J.T.Twisleton was the only clergyman of the Church of England in the Country but he was assisted by ‘Preachers of the Gospel’ of whom there were six” (F.L.Beven, ed. *A History of the Diocese of Colombo*. Colombo: Times of Ceylon, 1946, p. 12).

⁸ J.E.Tennent (*Christianity in Ceylon*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service (Reprint of 1850 Edition), 1998, p. 107) and J.Cordiner (*Description of Ceylon*, p.98) mention only three missionaries who came to Sri Lanka on behalf of LMS. It is true that out of the six missionaries selected for the eastern mission only three were appointed to work in the island, while the missionary team was at the Cape another missionary was added to the Sri Lankan batch (C.N.V.Fernando, *History of Christianity in Ceylon*, pp. 50-52).

⁹ Since the Wesleyans are better known as Methodists in contemporary Sri Lanka this dissertation refers to them as Methodists. The old name has been retained only when other sources are cited.

¹⁰ J.E.Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*, p. 107.

extended their activities eastwards through Hangwella (1819), to Matale (1835) and then to Kandy (1841).¹¹ The Methodists had their mission stations along the populous southern and western coastline. Beginning at three key positions in Colombo, Galle, and Matara, they established, within two decades, new stations in the intermediate towns and villages of Megamuva, Moratuwa, Panadura, Kalutara, Ambalangoda and Weligama.¹² The Church Missionary Society chose two places a little more inland: Baddegama (1819), twelve miles from Galle, and Kotte (1823), five miles Southeast of Colombo. They also established a third station at Kandy (1818).¹³ The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel began their work at Colombo (1840), and soon established mission stations in the western province at Kalutara and in the central province at Nuwera-Eliya.¹⁴

1. INITIAL RESPONSES OF THE BUDDHISTS

The Buddhists, monks as well as laity, did not at first oppose the arrival and the activities of the Christian missionaries. In fact, the Buddhists are very proud even to this day to point out that they were tolerant to other religions. Hence they affirm, “the spirit of tolerance and understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilisation.”¹⁵ They go to the extent of saying, “the most important feature which distinguishes the Buddhist attitude to other religions is its tolerance of other ideas.”¹⁶ In Sri Lanka, “tolerance of other faiths was a well-established Buddhist

¹¹ History of the Baptist mission in Sri Lanka is found in J.A. Ewing, *Lanka: The Resplendent Isle: The Story of the Baptist Mission in Ceylon*. London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1912.

¹² They had established a mission station in the Eastern province, too. An early attempt to narrate the history of the Methodist mission in Sri Lanka was R.S.Hardy's *Jubilee Memorials of the Wesleyan Mission*. (Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1864) which covers its history from 1814 to 1864. History up to 1964 is found in W.J.T.Small, ed. *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*. (Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1971).

¹³ A detail account of this missionary society's earliest history is found in J.Selkirk, *Recollection of Ceylon*. (New Delhi: Navrang Publishers [Reprint of 1844 Edition], 1993). History up to 1918 is narrated in J.W.Balding, *The Centenary Volume of the Church Missionary Society in Ceylon 1818-1918*. Madras: Church Missionary Society, 1922. Information is also found in F.L.Beven, ed. *A History of the Diocese of Colombo*, pp. 145-156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 123-145.

¹⁵ W.Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*. Oxford: One World Publications, 1959. p. 5.

¹⁶ L.de Silva, “The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions” in *Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities*, XI (1985), p.111.

tradition.”¹⁷ The Portuguese, who ruled the Maritime Provinces, had confirmed this in sixteenth century by stating that the Buddhists believed “one can go to heaven by many ways.”¹⁸ Similarly, the Dutch in the seventeenth century had observed that “not only were the people prepared to hear contrary views regarding religion but even took criticism of Buddhism itself with equanimity.”¹⁹ That the Buddhists treated the people of other faiths with respect is also evident from the comments made by Robert Knox, a seventeenth-century English political prisoner in the Kandyan Kingdom.²⁰ Knox commended Buddhists, noting that the King of Kandy never attempted to force the Christians “to comply with the Country’s Idolatry” and the King and people both respected and honoured “Christians as Christians.”²¹ Knox further stated, “they do much extol and commend Christianity, temperance and truth in word and actions; and confess that it is out of weakness and infirmity, that they cannot practice the same.”²² Robert Percival, another Englishman,²³ remarked in the early nineteenth century:

The injustice of the Portuguese in forcing religious tenets upon them [the Sinhalese] must have shocked them the more as they have not the smallest idea of intolerant zeal. So far are they from being displeased at Europeans, or people of other persuasions entering their temples and observing their ceremonies, that they are rather gratified by such marks of attention, and account the presence of visitors as an honour done to themselves.²⁴

¹⁷ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 128. It seems however, that the Buddhists at that time had even surpassed the attitude of the Buddha when encountering other religious traditions. Since the Buddha had rejected certain aspects of Brahmanism of his day, some Buddhist scholars now depict the Buddhist attitude towards other religions as “critical tolerance” (Cf. K.N.Jayatilleke, *The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions*. Colombo: D.A.Ratnayake Trust, 1966). This attitude was “epitomised in the Buddha’s unwillingness to accept tradition, heresy etc, as means of knowing truth.” (C.Wijebandara, *Early Buddhism: Its Religious and Intellectual Milieu*. Kelaniya: Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993, p. 95). Hence “the Buddha demanded an unbiased critical attitude to be cultivated by the monks towards statements on religious-philosophic matters” (*Ibid.* p. 100).

¹⁸ F.de Queyroz, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*. Colombo: Catholic Press, 1930, p. 700.

¹⁹ K.W.Goonewardena, “Dutch Policy Towards Buddhism in Sri Lanka: Some Aspects of its Impact” in *Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1990, p. 319.

²⁰ Robert Knox, an English sailor of the British East India Company, was taken as a prisoner by the Kandyan king in 1660 and detained there until he managed to escape after 19 years. During this time he traded, bought land, built a house, and managed to reach a state of some prosperity.

²¹ R.Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, (Reprint of 1681 Edition), 1981, p. 83.

²² *Ibid.* p. 102.

²³ R.Percival was in command of a British Regiment, who came to the island in 1798 and left in 1802.

²⁴ R.Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service (Reprint of 1803 Edition), 1990, p. 210.

Hence, it is not surprising that even Daniel J.Gogerly,²⁵ a nineteenth-century Methodist missionary who was determined to overthrow Buddhism in Sri Lanka,²⁶ once remarked, “the adherents of that faith regard with reverence the teachers of other religions.”²⁷ Similarly, another Methodist missionary of that era, R.Spence Hardy²⁸ also recognised that “the priests of Budha [sic], however, manifest little hostility to the various religions that are professed around them.”²⁹ The Buddhists at that period thought that, “the English people worshipped Jesus Christ, and that Singhalese [sic] people worshipped Budha [sic]... They were both good religions, and would both take those that professed them to heaven at last,”³⁰ and concluded, “the way to resolve the question of whether to worship God or Buddha was to worship both.”³¹

At the beginning of the nineteenth-century, Buddhists, in general, did not see Buddhism as being in competition with other religions. Openness to all that was religious was characteristic of the people. The *Sangha* [the community of Buddhist monks] was willing to give hospitality to Christians, to listen to Christian scriptures and to ask favours of Christians. Lay people saw no incongruity in expressing devotion to both Jesus Christ and the Buddha.³²

It was precisely owing to such a spirit of tolerance on the part of Buddhism that Christian missionaries encountered no resistance or objections during the initial stages of their missionary work in Sri Lanka. The missionaries, in fact, enjoyed a warm welcome and

²⁵ Daniel J.Gogerly played an important role in the emergence of the controversies and more will be said about him in the latter part of this chapter.

²⁶ D.J.Gogerly's such intention is evident from his statements quoted elsewhere in this chapter.

²⁷ D.J.Gogerly, *An Introductory Sketch of Buddhism*, p. 4.

²⁸ Robert Spence Hardy was born in 1 July 1803 at Preston. He came to Sri Lanka in September 1825, ministered until 1847, and went back to England. However, he came back again in 1862 and succeeded Gogerly as the chairman of the South Circuit of the Methodist mission. He finally returned to England in 1865 and on the 16 April 1868 he died at Headingley, Leeds. He has written several articles and published many books on Buddhism, Sri Lanka and Grammar books in English and Sinhalese. (W.J.T.Small, *History of the Methodist Church*, p. 622).

²⁹ R.S.Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*. London: Partridge and Oakley, 1850, p. 412. E.J.Harris observes that this was not restricted to Sri Lanka. She refers to the writings of Francis Buchanan about Buddhism in Burma at the end of the 18th century to substantiate this (E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion: The British Encounter with Buddhism in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Kelaniya: Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993, p. 583).

³⁰ A statement made by a Buddhist monk to J.Selkirk (*Recollections of Ceylon*, p. 379).

³¹ A Buddhist boy's reply to Rev.T.Daniel cited in E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 585.

³² *Ibid.* p. 586.

generous hospitality from Buddhists. For instance, Benjamin Clough,³³ one of the first Methodist missionaries to the island, remarked that the Buddhist monks were “men of mild and affable disposition.”³⁴ Hardy, wrote about his experience:

In travelling through unfrequented parts of the interior, as was once my wont and my delight, I usually took up my abode at the *pansal* [Buddhist temple], and seldom was I refused a night's lodging or a temporary shelter during the heat of the day. The priests would bring out the alms-bowl, when they saw that I was hungry... or they would bring tobacco or some other luxury, to express their satisfaction at my visit.³⁵

An English lawyer who served in Sri Lanka wrote in 1850, “as a body, the Buddhist priesthood in Ceylon are moral and inoffensive.”³⁶ Tennent also testifies “the Buddhist priesthood... continued to resort to the missionaries and invited their attendance at the temples, to furnish answers to their interrogatories as to the proofs and principles of Christianity.”³⁷ Hence, Clough wrote about himself and William Harvard, “we have spent much of our time in conversing, in a quiet way, with the most learned priests we could meet with.”³⁸ Similarly, CMS missionary Ward speaks of a monk in Mahabadda with whom he “talked upon all the leading points of Buddhism, with calmness and good humour.”³⁹ The missionaries were able to build on this, and drew many people to their preaching centres. Thomas H. Squance,⁴⁰ for instance, another of the earliest Methodist

³³ Benjamin Clough was born in 1791 at Bradford and came to Sri Lanka on 29 June 1814. He ministered in Galle and Colombo and returned to England in 1837. He died at London on 13 April 1853. From 1825 to 1837 he served as the chairman of the South Circuit. He has published English-Sinhalese and Sinhalese-English dictionaries, Pali grammar and Vocabulary, translated a book from Pali to Sinhalese, and published some sermons in Sinhalese (W.J.T.Small, *History of the Methodist Church*, p. 613).

³⁴ B.Clough, *Missionary Letter*, 25 January 1814.

³⁵ R.S.Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*, pp. 312-313. Similarly, Harington says that the Buddhist monks were “as civil and attentive to me as men could be, and after presenting me with coco-nut and plantains, would not allow me to pay for them” (Quoted in E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, pp. 583-584). J.E.Tennent who is critical about the moral character of the Sinhalese would say, that “to the strangers the mass of the Sinhalese people appear courteous and mild; they seldom fail to exhibit in their outward demeanour the evidences of sympathy, benevolence, and gratitude” (*Christianity in Ceylon*, p. 251).

³⁶ H.Sirr, *Ceylon and the Cingalasa Vol.II*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, (Reprint of 1850 Edition), 1991, p.113.

³⁷ J.E.Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*, p. 312.

³⁸ *Methodist Magazine*, XXXIX (1816), p. 398.

³⁹ *CMS Proceedings for Asia 1821-1823* Quoted in E.J.Harris, “Crisis and Competition” p. 14. Harris also cites some incidents in which the monks had asked some favours from the missionaries in the assumption of commonality of interest (Ibid. p. 14).

⁴⁰ Thomas Hall Squance was born on 3 February 1770 at Exeter. He came to Sri Lanka in 1814. He ministered in Galle, Jaffna and in South India as well. He returned to England in 1822 and died on 21 April 1868 (W.J.T.Small, *History of the Methodist Church*, p. 641).

missionaries, wrote from the southern part of the island in 1815 that he was able to draw 2000 to hear him preach in an open field.⁴¹ He further stated that he had “frequently a very large congregation”⁴² and when he preached in the bazaar people would lay aside their business to “listen with great attention.”⁴³ In the same year, Clough remarked that he had positive response from a large crowd who had come to the Kelaniya temple.⁴⁴ Similarly, George Erskine, another early Methodist missionary, remarked that multitudes convened to listen in rural villages.⁴⁵ Clough had even remarked that in some places nearly 4500 people attended for worship services.⁴⁶ Hence, there is no doubt that the initial attempts of the missionaries to Christianise the country were not met with resistance or rejection. In fact, the monks went to the extent of assisting the missionaries in the making of places of Christian worship in the immediate neighbourhood of their temples, and even placed the preaching halls attached to Buddhist temples at the disposal of Christian missionaries.⁴⁷

The early missionaries were even “disappointed by the *Sangha*’s eirenic response, which they tended to interpret as religious indifference.”⁴⁸ Hardy remarked, “it is almost impossible to move them, even to wrath,”⁴⁹ However, this was due not to “indolence and apathy within Buddhists, as the missionaries supposed,”⁵⁰ but to a genuine interest in anything religious. Sri Lankans gather in bazaars and churches to listen to the missionaries in these early decades... because they were sincerely curious to widen their religious

⁴¹ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 209; *Methodist Magazine*, XXXIX (1816), p. 154.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 154.

⁴³ *Methodist Magazine*, XXXIX (1816), p. 275.

⁴⁴ B.Clough, *Missionary Letter*. 3 November 1815.

⁴⁵ *Methodist Magazine*, XL (1817), p. 197.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* XXXIX (1816), p. 190.

⁴⁷ W.M.Harvard, *A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*. pp. 270, 272-273, 290. K.Malalgoda highlights the generous help rendered by the two scholarly monks to the Colombo Bible Society in producing a Sinhalese Bible. He states that the monks “gave their assistance to the venture without the least reluctance” (*Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 211).

⁴⁸ R.Gombrich & G.Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. p. 203.

⁴⁹ R.S.Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*, p. 430.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Ibid.* pp. 312-313; B.Clough, *Methodist Magazine*, 1816, p. 399.

knowledge.”⁵¹ However, the missionaries were puzzled because “interreligious encounter was seen by them as inevitably involving confrontation between exclusivist claims.”⁵² Nevertheless, the initial Buddhist goodwill toward the Christian missionaries cooled gradually upon the discovery that the intentions of the missionaries were to eradicate Buddhism from Sri Lanka. As Gogerly has observed, “until Christianity assumed a decidedly opposing position, even the priests looked upon that religion with respect, and upon its founder with reverence.”⁵³

The missionaries soon realised that the interest of the people did not indicate a rejection of Buddhism. In fact, it was a reflection of their openness to religion in general and their eagerness to gain religious insights from as wide a context as possible... At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Buddhists, in general, did not see Buddhism as being in competition with other religions. Openness to all that was religious was characteristic of the people.⁵⁴

Finally, the missionaries had come to realise that the Buddhist monks “would be willing to enter into an alliance with the servants of God, and would have had no hesitation in worshipping Jesus Christ, if they would have worshiped Buddha.”⁵⁵ This inclusivism did not sit well with the missionaries, however, who demanded fidelity to Jesus Christ alone. The missionaries often visited the Buddhist temples, especially during the times of ceremonies and festivals, distributed tracts, and made speeches denouncing Buddhism and Buddhist practices.⁵⁶ For instance, in 1835, when 24 Buddha images were consecrated at the temple of Kotte, the CMS missionaries went to the temple daily for a whole week to distribute a special tract written for that particular occasion titled *Sin and Folly of Image*

⁵¹ E.J.Harris, “Crisis and Competition” p. 22.

⁵² E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 587.

⁵³ Quoted in J.E.Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*, p. 240. Gogerly had further stated, “I have seen it stated in a controversial tract, written by a Buddhist priest of Matura [sic.] not fifteen years since, that probably Christ in a former state of existence was a God residing in one of the six heavens, a position which they represented Gotama as having occupied immediately previous to his birth as Buddhu [sic].” (*Ibid.* p. 240).

⁵⁴ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, pp. 584, 586.

⁵⁵ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 286.

⁵⁶ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 223.

Worship.⁵⁷ Due to such continued provocative activities, the monks began to reject the missionaries and eventually oppose their activities.

Thus, it is not very surprising that persistent attacks on Buddhism, in both the spoken and the written word, eventually provoked the Buddhists to withdraw their tolerance and to turn against Christianity.⁵⁸

By 1840s the response to Christianity was taking an actively antagonistic form.⁵⁹ Sporadic and localised opposition to missionary work, however, had surfaced in earlier times. For instance Clough, who appreciated the discussions he had with the Buddhist monks and said that they “will answer any questions proposed to them,”⁶⁰ in 1816 lamented that “it is very difficult to get them to answer any questions.”⁶¹ Again in 1819 there were some opposition to the missionaries in the Southern province.⁶² Nevertheless, these were a few individual and isolated incidents of opposition. Apart from such sporadic resistance, the missionaries generally had a positive response for nearly ten years.

Sometimes the missionaries heard of individual protests and vexations, as one after the other forsook the idols, to worship in the church; but no real opposition was shewn to their operations by the Buddhists during the first ten years.⁶³

In 1826 opposition surfaced in Kelaniya,⁶⁴ and this was more obvious in the Kandyan region where the missionaries had not made much progress at that time.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, gradually opposition increased in the Southern and Western provinces as well. In 1830 Selkirk wrote, “they [Buddhists] are in a state of greater excitement than ever I knew them before. They become angry and impatient when they are told by us that they are sinners,

⁵⁷ J.Selkirk, *Recollections of Ceylon*, pp. 441-450.

⁵⁸ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 212.

⁵⁹ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 339.

⁶⁰ B.Clough, *Missionary Letter*, 25 January 1814.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 14 February 1816.

⁶² *Third School Report of the Wesleyan Mission 1819*, p. 31 Quoted in E.J.Harris, “Crisis and Competition” p. 25.

⁶³ J.Nicholson, “The South Ceylon Wesleyan Mission: Bangalore Conference Report” in *Ceylon Friend*, IX p. 236.

⁶⁴ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 74.

⁶⁵ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 339.

and that their idolatry will not profit them.”⁶⁶ He further states that in 1833, Christian tracts were torn in front of his eyes, others stuck in trees whilst some were destined to become wadding for guns.⁶⁷ In the late 40s, there was a series of anti-missionary incidents in the Kalutara-Panadura-Moratuwa area, immediately south of Colombo, and these, according to the impression of the missionaries, were organised by the monks.⁶⁸ In 1849, the missionaries encountered severe opposition when attempting to build a church in Etul Kotte, in the vicinity of Colombo.⁶⁹ In fact, by the 1860s the Buddhists’ opposition to Christianity was much more self-confident and vocal than it had been before.⁷⁰ Hence, Hardy who earlier enjoyed the hospitality of the monks, exclaimed “they now refuse to render any assistance to the missionaries, as before.”⁷¹ In 1863, he could “scarcely find a place to welcome [him].”⁷²

It must be pointed out here that until 1799, when the British gave religious freedom to all citizens of the country,⁷³ the Buddhists were not in a position to rise against Christian missionary activities. Under the colonial powers of the Portuguese and Dutch, “Buddhism in Ceylon was in a state of slumber if not of actual deterioration,”⁷⁴ for “Christianity displaced Buddhism into the background,”⁷⁵ Once the Portuguese had consolidated their power in the Maritime Provinces, Buddhism lost its age-old traditional state patronage.⁷⁶ Since Buddhism in Sri Lanka totally depended upon the ruling king for its growth and survival,⁷⁷ when the Buddhists lost their kingdom, they could not oppose the missionary

⁶⁶ J.Selkirk, *Recollection of Ceylon*, p. 352.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 419.

⁶⁸ K.N.O.Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion and Ethnic Assertiveness*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 92.

⁷⁰ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 340.

⁷¹ R.S.Hardy, *The Legends and Theories of the Buddhists Compared with History and Science*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, (Reprint of 1866 Edition), 1993, p. VIII – IX.

⁷² R.S.Hardy, *Missionary Letter*. 16 May 1863.

⁷³ The official edict relating to this religious freedom is cited in the footnote 6 of this chapter.

⁷⁴ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The Portuguese and Dutch Periods*. Ilford: SPS Communications, 2000, p. 145.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 64.

⁷⁷ In Sri Lanka, the ruling kings were the secular heads of Buddhism and their major duty is to protect and promote Buddhism. Hence, “the first duty of a king on ascending the throne was to express his loyalty to

work of the Portuguese. There was, of course some opposition to the Portuguese invasion, but they were initial political uprisings against their capturing the land, and they were suppressed by the Portuguese armed forces. The Portuguese were known as “cruel, inhuman, rapacious, bigoted and savage persecutors of Buddhism in their endeavour to impose their faith... on the people of Sri Lanka.”⁷⁸ In fact, they persecuted the Buddhists and destroyed their temples and sacred objects in order to eradicate Buddhism and establish Christianity. In such a state, the Buddhists were not in a position to voice their grievances or to react against the Portuguese.

The subsequent colonial government of the Dutch also “looked upon Buddhism as a form of paganism, something that the Protestant Christians could not allow to exist or to prosper.”⁷⁹ Hence, there was no freedom to practice any other religion other than their Reformed form of Christianity, and only those who were officially registered as Christians were able to get even minor employment, marry legally and register the birth of a child. Due to such severe restrictions, i.e. since “all civil rights and inheritance depended on a person’s church affiliation,”⁸⁰ Buddhists became “official Christians”, but they remained “Buddhists inwardly.”⁸¹ Since the majority of the Buddhists were happy to have this dual religious identity – one official religion for “registering their marriages, the births of their children, for holding office, etc.”⁸² and another as a personal religion – there was not much opposition to the Christian mission during the Dutch rule. Even the Buddhists admit, “the efforts of the Dutch in the propagation of their religion did not affect Buddhism much.”⁸³ In fact, the Buddhists did not bother to oppose an official Christianity which provided many privileges to them.

Buddhism by giving alms, building monasteries, etc., for the welfare of the religion” (L.A.de Silva, *Buddhism: Belief and Practices in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Lake House Investment, 1974, p. 199).

⁷⁸ H.R.Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, p. 60.

⁷⁹ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: Portuguese and Dutch Periods*, p. 145.

⁸⁰ H.R.Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, p. 65.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 65.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 65.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 65.

Nevertheless, religious restriction under the Portuguese and Dutch rule cannot be considered as totally responsible for such a feeble state of Buddhism. For, Buddhism in Sri Lanka had already been declining, and, consequently, it could not oppose the advancing Portuguese political and religious power. The popular Buddhist belief that Buddhism began its decay and decline with the coming of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century is not correct, for "Buddhism's downward tendency had begun long before Christian colonialism came on the scene."⁸⁴ In fact, "the Portuguese caught the Sinhalese civilisation when it was already fast disintegrating."⁸⁵ When the Portuguese arrived in 1505, "the scene was marked by a political decadence and a weakened Buddhism."⁸⁶ Politically, the island was divided, and was "torn by civil war and all manner of internal strife and intrigue."⁸⁷ In fact, "civil strife, internal dissension, rivalries of local kings... made resistance to the Portuguese impossible and ineffective."⁸⁸ Since Buddhism in Sri Lanka, from the beginning, was closely linked with the King,⁸⁹ and its spread and survival were mainly due to the state patronage, when the Sinhalese monarchy was in decline Buddhism also declined. Hence, it was not in a position to oppose the forces of Christian mission.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: Portuguese and Dutch Periods*, p. viii.

⁸⁵ B.H.Farmer, *Ceylon: A Divided Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 8.

⁸⁶ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: Portuguese and Dutch Periods*, p. 19.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. iii. The sixteenth century Sri Lanka was politically divided into three separate Kingdoms. Hence, the northern part of the Island was known as Jaffna Kingdom, the central highland was named as Kandyan Kingdom, and the western and southern part was the Kotte Kingdom. Kotte was further divided into 3 parts in 1521. The large section of this divided Kingdom was named as Kotte, and the other two were known as Sitavaka and Rayigama. Conflict and war between these divided kingdoms continued even after the arrival of the Portuguese.

⁸⁸ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: Portuguese and Dutch Periods*, p. 19.

⁸⁹ Though there were Buddhists in Sri Lanka before its official dawn in the island during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (250-210 BC) through the mission of the Indian Emperor Asoka's emissary Mahinda (K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 9), the original spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was largely due to the King's enthusiastic initiative and support (W.Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. Dehiwela: The Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1993, pp. 48-61). In fact, "without the support of kings and emperors, the triumphant spread of the *Dharma* throughout Asia would have been impossible" (E.Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Publishers, 1951, p. 72). In Sri Lanka it was royal patronage that made Buddhist missionary activity the more effective.

⁹⁰ The decline of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, of course, goes back to the end of Polonnaruwa Kingdom. The "decadence [of Buddhism] was alarming by the twelfth century, and continued till the advent of Portuguese... The Sinhalese became a people without strong moorings before the advent of European nations" (M.Wickremasinghe, *Aspects of Sinhalese Culture*. Colombo: The Associated Newspaper of Ceylon Ltd., 1958, p. 93.) From the beginning of the 13th century, "there were two seemingly contradictory trends operating as far as Buddhism was concerned. There was, first of all, a very noticeable deterioration in the

There was, of course, a revival in Buddhism in 1753. This was a remarkable achievement of an un-ordained monk, Valivita Saranankara (1698-1778), who formed the *Silvat Samagama* (the brotherhood of the pious) and called for a return to more exacting standards of conduct for the monks and persuaded the king to bring monks from Thailand to re-establish higher ordination of the monks.⁹¹ This happened when the Dutch were ruling the Maritime Provinces, who were more tolerant towards Buddhism at that time in order to extend and secure their trade in the island.⁹² Hence the revival spread to the southwest littoral too, but it was mainly confined to the monasteries especially in relation to the study, discipline, and ordination of the monks.⁹³ While the monks adhered to the traditional attitude of tolerance due to the study and discipline of the monastic orders, the laity, “being used to the idea that different religious systems created to different spheres of life... [were able to] adapt to the idea that Protestant Christianity... [was] the religion of state ceremonial and public life”⁹⁴ when the Protestant missionaries commenced their work in Sri Lanka. In fact the laity did not see “culpable inconsistency”⁹⁵ in professing themselves both as Buddhist and Christian, and did not oppose the activities of the missionaries when the Dutch ruled the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka.

morale and discipline of the *Sangha*, and Buddhism itself confronted surprisingly powerful pressure from Hinduism” (K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 92).

⁹¹ This brought the formation of the *Siyam Nikaya* (*Siyam Fraternity*), the most important of the modern Buddhist sects, and the development within it of the Malvatta and Asgiriya chapters, both adhering to the same doctrinal tenets and each of equal status (K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 203). The detailed history of this revival is found in K.Vacissara, *Valivita Saranankara and the Revival of Buddhism in Ceylon*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London: University of London, 1961.

⁹² It was the Dutch who provided ship to bring monks from Thailand.

⁹³ Saranankara’s reforms led to a series of other reforms in the *Sangha*, especially in the nineteenth century, as various groups imported monks from Burma to administer higher ordination. This was due to the restrictions of the *Siyam Nikaya* in ordaining the highest cast, *goyigama* only. The emerging non-*goyigama* elite in the low country founded monastic fraternities for their members. Thus Amarapura *Nikaya* (in 1803) and *Ramanna Nikaya* (1864) came into existence (G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992, p.46).

⁹⁴ R.Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1988, p. 178. Such dual identity is not peculiar to Sri Lanka. Even in India “the missionaries could not understand how the people of India would adopt a seemingly contradictory colonised stance. With their long historical, religious background, Indians would externally adapt European values in education, science, and technology. At the same time, they would conform to the exigencies of Indian religious life, which in its entirety was diametrically opposed to western cultural values. This double aspect of the Indian psyche has been at home for centuries within a dialectically opposed and diametrically conflictive Eastern cultural and religious duality” (J.S.Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Postcolonial Reflections*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1993, p. xviii).

⁹⁵ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, pp. 36-37.

2. IRRITATIONS CAUSED BY THE CHRISTIANS

The activities of the missionaries gradually irritated the Buddhists to put aside their traditional spirit of tolerance and aroused them to retaliate against the attacks on Buddhism. The missionaries had condemned Buddhism as “false, absurd, blasphemous, dangerous... [and a] gigantic system of error.”⁹⁶ Buddhist worship and temple ceremonies were all “horrifying and appalling, abominable and wicked” in the eyes of the missionaries.⁹⁷ They asserted that “Buddhism makes a fool of man by promising to guide him to safety, while it leads him to the very verge of the fatal precipice”⁹⁸ which is “accompanied by the worship of demons and the propitiation of malignant infernal spirits.”⁹⁹ According to them, the Buddhists were “superstitious, idolatrous and devil worshipping.”¹⁰⁰ Hence they remarked, “to be a Christian a man must regard Buddha as a false teacher, and his claim to supremacy as a sin against Almighty God.”¹⁰¹ According to them the Buddhists converts are in fact, “converted from the error of their own way.”¹⁰² The missionaries studied Buddhism but their main objective in such endeavour was to expose its “defects and errors,”¹⁰³ “their absurdity and sinfulness”¹⁰⁴ and eventually “disestablish Buddhism.”¹⁰⁵

The missionaries’ critical attitude towards non-Christian religions was in fact, due to their religious beliefs and cultural background. They were deeply influenced by the eighteenth-century Evangelical revivalism, the expansion of European power and influence and the

⁹⁶ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 74.

⁹⁷ R.S.Hardy, *Eastern Monachism*, p. 321.

⁹⁸ R.S.Hardy, *The Legends and Theories of the Buddhists, Compared with History and Science*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service (Reprint of 1866 Edition), 1993. p. 210.

⁹⁹ R.S.Hardy, *The British Government and the Idolatry of Ceylon*. Colombo: Wesleyan Press, 1839, pp. 11-12

¹⁰⁰ J.Selkirk, *Recollections of Ceylon*, p. vi.

¹⁰¹ R.S.Hardy, *The British Government and the Idolatry of Ceylon*, p. 216.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 227.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. XI.

¹⁰⁴ W.M.Harvard, *A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*. p. 234.

¹⁰⁵ C.Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*. Donald S.Joseph, ed., Chicago/London: University of

Enlightenment rationalism. Since the missionaries were men of their own time and context, their criticisms of Buddhism and local culture, their enthusiasm in converting the people, and the whole manner of their life, must be understood in the light of these historical realities.¹⁰⁶

First of all, the nineteenth-century Christian missionaries were the products of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival and its subsequent development in Britain known as Evangelicalism.¹⁰⁷ This movement was not confined to any single Christian denomination, but “found expression in a variety of institutional forms”¹⁰⁸ which were “dedicated to spreading the gospel.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, the autonomous missionary societies that were emerging in that era and expanding their missionary activities throughout the British Empire owe their origin and zeal to this evangelical revival movement. Fundamental to all these missionary societies is the conviction that “humanity was in a fallen state and that those who did not respond to the offer of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ were lost to eternal darkness”¹¹⁰ James Montgomery’s verse expresses this missionary mind aptly:

The heathen perish day by day,
Thousands upon thousands pass away.
O Christians to their rescue fly,
Preach Jesus to them before they die.¹¹¹

Chicago Press, 1995, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ This is not to justify the behaviours of the missionaries, but to understand the historical context, which conditioned their life style and worldview and of course their missionary activities.

¹⁰⁷ Evangelical is “the standard description of the doctrines or ministers of the revival movement, whether inside or outside the Church of England... it applied to any aspect of the movement beginning in the 1730s” (D.W.Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London/New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 1)

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p.1.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1.

¹¹⁰ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 8.

¹¹¹ Quoted in K.Cracknell, “*The Attitude of Nineteenth Century Missionaries to Other Religions*” Unpublished Seminar Paper, Ware: All Nations Christian College, 1968. p. 5.

The missionaries were “convinced that the hand of God was at work in favour of them, and that they should save souls from worshipping idols, the enemy of God.”¹¹² According to the missionaries, “grossest darkness and ignorance prevailed”¹¹³ in Sri Lanka, for it is “the kingdom of heathen darkness”¹¹⁴ and they were convinced that it was their utmost duty to bring the light of the gospel to them in obedience to the divine call and will. Therefore they condemned Buddhism in order to introduce Christianity. In fact, while considering the missionaries’ historical, social and religious context, it is possible “to see their denunciation of other religions as a compassionate act for the eternal well-being of the people in Sri Lanka.”¹¹⁵

The nineteenth-century missionaries were also influenced deeply by the expansion of power and influence of the western world. Therefore, they believed that the existence of the powerful British Empire and its extending territory, with its commercial enterprise, was God’s providential preparation for their evangelistic work. Hence, William Carey’s famous pamphlet of 1792 drew attention to British mercantile expansion as pointing the way to the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecies, “that navigation, especially that which is commercial shall be one great mean of carrying on the work of God.”¹¹⁶ Likewise, the evangelicals who were known as the Clapham Sect, while attempting to secure free entry for missionaries to India, argued in the late eighteenth century:

In considering the affairs of the world as under the control of the Supreme Disposer, and those distant territories... providentially put into our hands... is it not necessary to conclude that they were given to us, not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, long sunk in darkness, vice and misery, the light and benign influence of the truth?¹¹⁷

¹¹² J.S.Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, p. 50.

¹¹³ J.Selkirk, *Recollections of Ceylon*, p. 245, 356.

¹¹⁴ J.Chapman, *Memorials of James Chapman*, p. 203.

¹¹⁵ E.J.Harris, “Crisis and Competition” p. 12.

¹¹⁶ W.Carey, *A Humble Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, London: Kingsgate Press (Reprint of the Original Edition), 1961, p. 68.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in J.S.Dharmaraj. *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, p. 45.

In 1812, one of the founders of London Missionary Society Thomas Haweis asserted, "this land seems peculiarly destined to be the instrument... to carry his salvation into the ends of the earth."¹¹⁸ Similarly, Samuel Baker, a colonist in Sri Lanka¹¹⁹ depicted Britain as "the apostle of Christianity throughout the world."¹²⁰ Indeed, "wealth, stability and expansion indicated [to the missionaries] a divinely ordained, providential role for Britain."¹²¹ Such a belief was also present in the missionaries who worked in Sri Lanka. They saw the empire "as thrusting a providentially-ordained duty or a God-given imperative on the British to Christianise 'heathen' societies."¹²² This explains why the missionaries criticised the British government authorities for their involvement in the Buddhist temporalities in accordance with the Kandyan Convention of 1815.¹²³

The missionaries also held a belief that their culture and civilisation was superior to all others. Hence, their goal in mission was not only to convert the "heathens" to Christianity but also to civilise them. They criticised local religions and culture in order to replace them with their western culture and Christian religion. In fact the nineteenth-century European mission was an aggressive cultural imperialism. For "the mission work was carried out with the aid of European colonisers with a view to civilising and Christianising the people."¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Quoted in A.Porter. "Religion, Missionary Enthusiasm and Empire" in *The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume III: The Nineteenth Century*. A.Porter, ed., Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 232.

¹¹⁹ Samuel Baker lived in Sri Lanka between 1847 and 1855 as an independent settler.

¹²⁰ S.W.Baker, *Eight Years Wanderings in Ceylon*. London: Longmans, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1855, p. 351.

¹²¹ A.Porter. "Religion, Missionary Enthusiasm and Empire" p. 232.

¹²² E.J.Harris, "Crisis and Competition" p. 11.

¹²³ The controversy relating to the Kandyan Convention of 1815 and the problems raised with its implementation were not in fact solved till the 1930s with the final settlement in favour of Buddhism, and the public Trustee exercising control of Buddhist Temporalities in colonial Sri Lanka. This subject is beyond the scope of the present dissertation, and which is dealt in detail by other works such as K.M.de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organisations in Ceylon 1840-1855*. London: Longmans, Greens & Company, 1965; C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*; and K.M.de Silva, "Buddhism and The British Government in Ceylon" in *The Ceylon Historical Journal*. X (July 1960 – April 1961).

¹²⁴ J.S.Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, p.11.

The missionaries were also the products of Enlightenment rationalism, for the “Evangelical version of Protestantism was created by Enlightenment,”¹²⁵ and the missionary enterprise was “a child of Enlightenment,”¹²⁶ for it “emerged from the matrix of the Enlightenment.”¹²⁷ In fact, the nineteenth-century missionaries’ “radical denial of salvific significance in other religious traditions was attributable not only to their mediaeval and reformation inheritances but to the new rationalism which was becoming prevalent in both Europe and America.”¹²⁸ It is true that “the whole movement of eighteenth-century thought has been depicted as irreligious in tendency, Voltaire’s assault on revealed and organised religion has been taken to be typical,”¹²⁹ and the evangelical revival of that century has often been treated as a reaction against the tide of rationalism.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, the revival was influenced by the enlightenment to a great extent. In fact, “its emergence was itself an expression of the age of reason,”¹³¹ for, the “origins and contours (of Evangelicalism) owe an immense debt to the philosophical and cultural patterns of the enlightenment.”¹³² Hence John Wesley, the founder of Methodism could say, “it is a fundamental principle with us, that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.”¹³³ Wesley as well as his followers and other evangelicals of that time in fact rejected the skeptical reasoning, but their minds were moulded by the new intellectual currents of their time. Hence the “enlightenment approach... was becoming more general” among the evangelicals of that century, and “the empiricist method... became equally habitual.”¹³⁴

¹²⁵ D.W.Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, p. 74.

¹²⁶ D.J.Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 274.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 344.

¹²⁸ K.Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914*. London: Epworth Press, 1995, p. 14.

¹²⁹ D.W.Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, p. 50.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 51.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 53.

¹³² B.Stanley, “Enlightenment and Mission: A Re-evaluation” *North Atlantic Missiology Project Position Paper 11*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, (September 1996), p. 1.

¹³³ Quoted in D.W.Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, p. 52.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 54,57.

Due to the enlightenment, Christians relied heavily on rational arguments and produced evidences for their teachings. "From their beginning, the independent evangelical missionary societies placed their training on developing the candidates' theological knowledge and ability to argue the truth of Christianity."¹³⁵ In missionary training of that period William Paley's '*A View of the Evidences of Christianity*', published in 1794, became a major source book. It is supposed to have "ranked second only to the Bible."¹³⁶ Paley's book gave arguments for the existence of God and the uniqueness of Christ, which appealed to empirical evidence and reason. The missionaries were convinced that such "reasoned argument would effect conversions."¹³⁷ According to them, there were evidences or arguments for Christianity, which would convincingly prove the truth of Christianity. In fact, "most missionaries travelled in the conviction that conversion from atheism could be made through appeal to the teleological argument alone."¹³⁸ This would in fact explain why the missionaries compelled the Buddhists to engage in discussions and even in debates.

The modern Protestant missionary movement was generally characterised by an unshakeable confidence in rational knowledge as an ally of Christian proclamation, a belief in the superiority and regenerative potential of Western technology and civilisation, and a tendency to dismiss other religions as "heathen idolatry."¹³⁹

The missionary criticisms of course were not merely "distasteful and offensive" to the Buddhists, "but also unjust, for they themselves made no similar attacks on Christianity."¹⁴⁰ The missionaries tried to eradicate the local religions and culture, and establish Christianity and western culture in Sri Lanka by condemning Buddhism and converting the Buddhists. Such missionary activities provoked the Buddhists to react against them. It cannot be denied that it was as "a direct result of the methods used by the

¹³⁵ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 479.

¹³⁶ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 271.

¹³⁷ E.J.Harris, "Crisis and Competition" p. 9.

¹³⁸ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 482.

¹³⁹ B.Stanley, "Enlightenment and Mission: A Re-evaluation" p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 213.

missionaries that the attitudes [of the Buddhists] changed.”¹⁴¹ In this section, some of the missionary activities that aroused antagonistic feelings and actions will be surveyed in order to trace the roots of the nineteenth-century Buddhist-Christian controversies.

A change in attitude towards Christianity is one of the main consequences for Buddhism of the approach engendered by the Evangelical Revival. It represented a move from inclusiveness to exclusiveness, from tolerance to defensive action, from dialogue to polemic, from a shrinking from controversy to an embracing of it.¹⁴²

(A) CONVERSIONS OF BUDDHIST MONKS

It seems that the conversions of some Buddhist monks to Christianity aggravated Buddhist sensitivities to some extent. When the Methodist missionaries commenced their ministry in Sri Lanka, they visited the Buddhist temples, dialoguing with local monks, and occasionally even debating with them. Consequently, many monks embraced Christianity. It seems that these conversions “irritated a nerve already sensitive after several centuries of colonial domination to aspersions upon the dignity and veracity of the *Dhamma* (Buddhist teaching).”¹⁴³

In 1814, an eminent monk was baptised in Colombo after being convinced by Clough’s arguments and reading one of his tracts.¹⁴⁴ According to the missionaries, the monk had argued daily with them about Christianity for several weeks.¹⁴⁵ He is known as Dharma Pandita Thero, a chief priest of a temple in Galle. He belonged to the Siyam fraternity¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, 589.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* p. 592.

¹⁴³ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 53.

¹⁴⁴ This tract had been printed under the title *A Conversation Between a Buddhist Priest and a Christian Missionary at Belligamme*. It is reported that this monk had become a Christian “through the mild, clear, and persuasive arguments and exhortations of the Rev. Mr. Clough” (W.M.Haward, *A Mission to Ceylon and India*, pp. 238-240).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 363-365.

¹⁴⁶ There are different sects or fraternities (*nikayas*) of monks in Sri Lanka mainly based on caste divisions. The oldest and perhaps most prestigious sect, the Siamese fraternity was formed in 1751 when in response to a request from the king of Kandy a delegation of Siamese monks had arrived in Sri-Lanka to restore valid ordination. This ordination was confined to the monks, who belong to the Goigama caste, which was regarded as the highest caste. Therefore the monks who belonged to the other castes (Salagama, Karava and Durava casts) sent their delegations to Burma (five delegations between 1800 and 1810) to receive and create new but authentic lines of ordination. The monks who received ordination in this way were known as Amarapura Nikaya to connote their Burmese origin. The third sect is called Ramanaya Nikaya that was

and on being baptised as a Christian, he took the name Petrus Panditasekara. He had a profound knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit and of the Buddhist scriptures and was one of the most eminent and respected monks in the island. A considerable number of young men were under his tutelage as monks.¹⁴⁷ The conversion of such an eminent monk was indeed detrimental to the Buddhist cause. He faced severe opposition from his community, had to be smuggled out of Galle fort, and was baptised in Colombo.¹⁴⁸

The year 1816 was notable for the conversion and baptism of a second famous Buddhist monk, Kapugama Dhammakkhanda Thero – a chief monk. He was stationed at Dadalla, near Galle. Clough, during his stay at Galle in 1814, visited his temple and gave him a Sinhalese New Testament. In 1815, the monk went to Colombo and argued with Clough and Harvard. Though he initially ridiculed Christianity, the missionaries seemingly answered his questions with regard to the existence of a supreme Creator. His main objection was against the Christian theory of the origin of evil. The monk visited the missionaries practically every day for three months, finally becoming convinced of the Christian teaching. He changed his name to George Nadoris de Silva and helped the missionaries to convert several other monks and laymen to Christianity.¹⁴⁹

Subsequently, many monks disrobed and embraced Christianity. In 1817, Methodist missionaries were instrumental in the conversion of another Buddhist monk who belonged to the *Siyam* fraternity, and was known as Daniel Alexander after his baptism.¹⁵⁰ In 1818, four monks were accepted by the Methodist missionaries as converts to Christianity. They

formed in 1862 by the monk Ambagahawatte who broke away from the Amarapura Nikaya and was successful in obtaining ordination in Burma (M.D.Raghvan, *The Karava of Ceylon*. Colombo: K.V.G.de Silva & Sons, 1961, pp. 136-137).

¹⁴⁷ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 29. R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, pp. 207-209. B.A.R. Coplans, *Methodism and Sinhalese Buddhism: The Wesleyan Methodist Encounter with Buddhism in Ceylon, 1814-1864*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Leeds: University of Leeds, 1980, pp. 52-53.

¹⁴⁸ R.S.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 207.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. *Methodist Magazine*, October 1817, pp. 721-730; R.S.Hardy's *Jubilee Memorials*, pp. 77-79; W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, pp. 39-40, and B.A.R. Coplans, *Methodism and Sinhalese Buddhism*, pp. 53-57.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 58.

were known as Don Andries de Silva, Don Adrian de Silva, Adam Sri Muni Ratna and Alexander Dharmarama.¹⁵¹ Again, in 1819, another Buddhist monk from the *Amarapura* fraternity was converted and baptised by Methodist missionaries and became known as Benjamin Parks, whose Buddhist name is not mentioned in any available sources.¹⁵² In 1826, another monk, Sri Buddha Rakkhita Thero from the *Siyam* fraternity became a Christian and took the name of John Cornelius.¹⁵³

There may have been many other such conversions, for it has been pointed out that “conversions were occurring at an alarming rate in the *Sangha* itself”¹⁵⁴ Yet, it should not be overlooked that these conversions, so highly valued by the missionaries, occurred only at the initial stages of the British missionary activities.¹⁵⁵ These conversions aggravated the Buddhist monks and paved the way for them to oppose the activities of the Christian missionaries. Since monks such as Buddha Rakkita Thero “espoused Christianity against strong opposition from the Buddhist community,”¹⁵⁶ it seems that conversions of the monks brought enmity between the Buddhists and Christians to some extent.

(B) CASTIGATION OF THE BUDDHIST RELIGION

A second and perhaps even more potent reason for the growing Buddhist opposition to Christian missionary activities was the polemical literature produced by the missionaries. The missionaries published several tracts and pamphlets in which Buddhism was castigated in extreme terms. Christians were convinced that their objectives could be better achieved by producing such printed materials than by going directly to the villagers and

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 58.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 57.

¹⁵³ W.J.T.Small, *History of the Methodist Church*, p. 62, R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, pp. 231-232.

¹⁵⁴ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 52

¹⁵⁵ R.F.Young and G.P.V.Somaratna observe that it “continued until at least 1848 with an increasingly alarming frequency” (*Ibid.* p. 45).

¹⁵⁶ B.A.R. Coplans, *Methodism and Sinhalese Buddhism*, p. 60.

preaching to them.¹⁵⁷ Hence, Gogerly, the manager of the Methodist press, declared that "it is by means of the press our principal attacks must be made upon this wretched system... We must direct our efforts to pull down this stronghold of Satan."¹⁵⁸ That the missionaries were determined to attack Buddhism is evident from the following expression of Gogerly,

The Buddhists wish us to occupy a kind of neutral ground, teaching the Christian system but not attacking theirs. This we have declined, and in all places, we strive to act on the offensive.¹⁵⁹

The Colombo Auxiliary Bible Society was formed in 1812 and issued 19,000 Bibles, 35,000 New Testaments, and 59,500 Scripture portions up until 1865.¹⁶⁰ In 1815, the Methodist missionaries established their printing press at Colombo, and, in 1816, the press and the types of the Bible Society were amalgamated with it. In the first two decades the Methodist press printed and distributed 109,170 books, and in the fifty years of its existence up to 1865, it circulated one and a half million books in Sri Lanka. CMS missionaries established their printing press in 1822 at Kotte. In 1825 the Colombo Auxiliary Religious Tract Society was founded, and published tracts criticising Buddhism.¹⁶¹ The Baptist missionaries founded their press in 1841 at Kandy, and maintained it for six years and during that period printed and circulated 140,100 tracts and

¹⁵⁷ As K.Malalgoda observes, the missionaries were handicapped to a great extent in reaching the Buddhists via preaching in comparison with the Buddhist monks. Of course there were some missionaries who gained considerable proficiency in Sinhalese, "but their knowledge of the language was far from perfect; nor were their expressions in it always idiomatic or readily intelligible to their auditors, and this was made worse by the novelty of the content of the expressions. With the highly complex system of Sinhalese honorifics, personal pronouns and their corresponding verbs and verbal affixes, the missionaries had virtually insurmountable difficulties... [They used] less polite and impolite form to more polite and over-polite... Apparently, the missionary, with his new doctrine of salvation and his limited knowledge of the language and customs of the people whom he visited, failed to attract the kind of serious attention that he expected from them... [The Buddhists] as heirs to a religious tradition in which preaching constituted an important element... had rather fixed notions about the proper time, place, and manner of preaching. The missionaries ignored those notions to their own cost." (*Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, pp. 197-201).

¹⁵⁸ D.J.Gogerly, *Missionary Letter*. 3 October 1831.

¹⁵⁹ D.J.Gogerly, *Missionary Letter*. 19 February 1835.

¹⁶⁰ J.Murdoch & J.Nicholson, *The Classified Catalogue of Printed Books and Tracts in Sinhalese*. Madras: Christian Vernacular Education Society, 1868. p. 5.

¹⁶¹ In the same year, the Jaffna Tract Society began its work in the northern province of Sri Lanka.

books in the Sinhala language.¹⁶² It then became the Sinhalese Tract Society, and up to 1859 it printed and distributed 1,532,038 tracts, handbills, pamphlets, and periodicals.¹⁶³

The tracts published by Christian missionaries at that time were extremely critical of Buddhism. The very first tract of the Colombo Auxiliary Religious Tract Society was the Baptist missionary Chater's *Dialogue Between a Buddhist and His Christian Friend*, which was directed against the atheistic and idolatrous system of the Buddhist.¹⁶⁴ In 1832, three tracts were published in Sinhalese. The first tract entitled *Extracts from Scripture* pointed out the folly and wickedness of idolatry. The second one *On Sabbath* was written in order to win converts by religious arguments. The third tract was *A Series of Objections, Being Reasons for Rejecting the Buddhist Faith*.¹⁶⁵ According to the missionaries, this third tract had a tremendous impact on their evangelistic work, and Clough wrote that the monks are "thrown into a state of general consternation."¹⁶⁶ In the same year, the distribution of a famous tract by a CMS missionary Samuel Lambrick, *An Exposition of the Errors of Buddhism*, caused much protest from Buddhists.¹⁶⁷ Another tract published in 1836, *A Warning to Heathens*, brought several converts to Christianity, including six monks in Kalutara area.¹⁶⁸ In 1847, a tract entitled *Man a Moral Agent and God the Governor and Judge of All* was published with further arguments challenging Buddhist conceptions.¹⁶⁹ In 1848, five tracts by Gogerly were published in which Christian doctrines were explained in opposition to Buddhist teachings.¹⁷⁰ In 1850, the Sinhalese Tract society published two tracts that made a profound impact entitled *Why are You a Buddhist?* and *The Rewards of*

¹⁶² J. Murdoch & J. Nicholson, *The Classified Catalogue*, p. 15.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 18. In 1859 this society was incorporated with the Ceylon Branch of the Christian Vernacular Education Society. The Roman Catholic press was established in 1843.

¹⁶⁴ T. Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition 1852-1906*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London: University of London, 1973, p. 196.

¹⁶⁵ *Tract Society Annual Report* London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1832, pp. 38-39

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 1832, pp. 38-39.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 1833, pp. 35-36.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 1836, pp. 42-43.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 1847, p. 26.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 1848, pp. 26-27.

Christianity and Buddhism.¹⁷¹ A further two tracts mentioned as being of particular interest to the Buddhists were, *The Hopes of the Buddhists*, and *Questions of Buddhism*. Both were published in 1854.¹⁷² In the following year, a tract was issued to encourage Buddhists to embrace Christianity entitled *Why should I Forsake Buddhism?*¹⁷³ The 1861 tract *The Touchstone* was an attempt to show the so-called “contradictory statements of Buddhism, the absurdities to which it leads and its inadequacy to meet the wants of fallen man.”¹⁷⁴ Several other tracts were published and, it has been calculated that 1,500,000 missionary tracts and pamphlets were circulated between 1849-1861.¹⁷⁵

The missionaries also introduced to the Sri Lankan Buddhists two other new literary medias, namely periodicals and newspapers. The first periodical issued in Sinhalese was *Masika Tagga* (Monthly Reward) in 1832, which consisted mainly of scripture stories.¹⁷⁶ *Lanka Nidhanaya* (The Treasure of Ceylon) started in 1839 and discontinued in 1846, but, in 1850, the second series was started by the Sinhalese Tract Society. The *Touchstone* was commenced by the Kandy Baptist Mission in January 1842, and, in 1844, the BMS started another periodical entitled *The Commentator*. *Uragal* (The Touchstone) and *Vapuranna* (The Sower) of the Roman Catholics were first printed in 1849.¹⁷⁷ *Sastra Nidhanaya* (The Treasure of Science) was printed in 1846 and 1847 by the Native Norman Institute.¹⁷⁸ Another Catholic periodical *Lankabhivrdhiya* (Progress of Ceylon) was printed in Kandy in March 1852.¹⁷⁹ In July 1852, the CMS missionaries printed *The Sinhalese Missionary Record*. All these periodicals, though their life span was very short, were committed to the

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* 1850, p. 58.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* 1854, pp. 56-57.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* 1855, pp. 66-67.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 1861, pp. 102-103.

¹⁷⁵ J. Murdoch and J. Nicholson, *Classified Catalogue*, p. IV.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 46.

¹⁷⁷ T.A. Mendis, *Lankava Katolika Sasanaye Itihasaya*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁸ T. Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, p. 188.

¹⁷⁹ T.A. Mendis, *Lankava Katolika Sasanaye Itihasaya*, p. 34.

propagation of Christianity. The Catholics issued their first Sinhalese newspaper in 1846 entitled *Saddharma Sangrahaya* (Compilation of true Doctrine).¹⁸⁰

These missionary publications met with two contradictory responses. On the one hand, some Buddhists were converted to Christianity and became very critical of Buddhism. Some even predicted the eventual overthrow of Buddhism.¹⁸¹ But the majority reacted against them, for they aroused antagonistic Buddhist feelings, and “invoked protests by Buddhists.”¹⁸² The monks pointed out that Christian tracts were “like the sports of children trying to make their parents sick by playing in the sand.”¹⁸³ In fact, until the wide circulation of missionary publications, the Buddhists had not been aware of any major challenge to their religion other than the conversions of individual monks and laity. As a result of the missionary publications, however, “they began to realise that the missionaries were trying to destroy it entirely,”¹⁸⁴ for the missionary publications often exhorted the people “to discard Buddhism and embrace Christianity.”¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, these publications failed to fulfil such aspirations of the missionaries.

The significant result of this wide circulation was not that it helped the missionaries to achieve what they wanted to achieve – converts to Christianity – but rather that it provoked the Buddhists, though only after a time, to retaliate and meet the missionaries on their own ground.¹⁸⁶

(C) COMPORTMENT OF THE BRITISH GOVERNORS

The third reason that provoked Buddhist irritation was the frustration of the Buddhist attempts to stop the missionaries’ anti-Buddhist literature by making complaints to the

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 34.

¹⁸¹ T.Kariyawasam quotes a poem written in 1852 by James D Alwis which says, “We hope the day may yet come when the Trio of the One Great God, will become a substitute for the Triad of Buddhism; and when men shall in truth and in spirit worship Jehovah, and, in a strain like the following sing praises to His name” (*Religious Activities*, p. 185).

¹⁸² C.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*, p. 122.

¹⁸³ From a letter sent to the Anglican missionary J.Selkirk by the monk Maligaspe Mangala on 5 August 1828. Quoted in R.F.Young “Imagined Beleaguerment” p. 177.

¹⁸⁴ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church*, p. 76.

¹⁸⁵ K.N.O.Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion and Ethnic Assertiveness*, p. 96.

¹⁸⁶ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 205.

government. In fact, the initial response of the Buddhists to missionary activities and literature was to send petitions to the government. "These petitions reveal the tolerance of the *Sangha* in the early years and their belief that an appeal to reason and harmony would have a positive result."¹⁸⁷ The Buddhist monks at first "assumed that the British in general would see that a wrong had been done to them."¹⁸⁸ However, the government apparently only intervened in some instances, and requested the missionaries not to upset the Buddhists. Nothing was done to prevent the publication and circulation of polemical literature. In the meantime, the missionaries altogether ignored the occasional advice and admonition of the Governors, believing that a Christian government should not hinder the progress of the missionary work. As the Tract Society's Annual Report of 1833 reveals, the officials of the society were confident that no action would be taken, since it was highly "improbable that any Christian government will ever interfere, and try to prevent anything that may be done to further the interest of Christianity."¹⁸⁹

The earliest petition of the Buddhists was made in 1815, in protest against Benjamin Clough's offensive conduct in a Buddhist temple at Kelaniya, where it is reported that he and other missionaries "contradicted the nonsense of Buddhism."¹⁹⁰ Subsequently, a Buddhist monk, influenced by the preaching of the missionaries, "decided to make a public renunciation of Buddhism"¹⁹¹ and reportedly "read a paper stating his reasons, and described Buddhism as a false religion."¹⁹² The Buddhists made a complaint against Clough, requesting the governor to prohibit him from ever returning. Clough himself remarked "the priests [monks] were so much displeased that they drew up a petition, and presented it to his Excellency the governor, stating how they had been disturbed and

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 588.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 587.

¹⁸⁹ *Tract Society Report*, 1833, pp. 35-36.

¹⁹⁰ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*, p. 12.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 12.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* p.13.

abused by us.”¹⁹³ However, this complaint did not prevent him visiting the temple again in 1826.

In 1826, there was unrest in Buddhist circles regarding pamphlets against their religion, allegedly printed at the CMS press at Kotte.¹⁹⁴ The Buddhists made a complaint to the government, and the government subsequently advised the CMS missionaries “their anti-Buddhist literature would only make the population hostile towards Christianity... [yet] “placards and printed posters were in circulation that cast scoffs and offensive reflections upon the Buddhist religion.”¹⁹⁵ In the same year Clough published a large sheet titled *Reasons Why I am not a Buddhist*. This “bold defiance of the ancient and mighty system awakened the priesthood [monks], and excited the whole Colombo district.”¹⁹⁶ Hence they again made a complaint to the government saying,

That the missionaries at various times before this, by preparing and circulating various kinds of books in which the Buddhist religion, and we the professors of it, are abused and despised, and also by speaking and writing against it, have brought great contempt upon our religion... They... again reading and disseminating books which they have prepared to bring contempt upon our religion and upon us who profess it... with great reverence and respect we humbly beg that your Excellency will be pleased in future [to restrict] the impious actions which the missionaries, not regarding the toleration allowed all religions by the great goodness of his most gracious majesty, the King of England, are doing.¹⁹⁷

On 21 October 1829, a petition was sent to the Governor, which was signed by 96 Kandyan monks.¹⁹⁸ The aggrieved citizens of Panadura appealed to the Governor to prevent Clough from casting aspersions on the Triple Gem when he preached there in

¹⁹³ *Methodist Magazine* XXXIV, 1816, p. 198.

¹⁹⁴ C. Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*, p. 122.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 122.

¹⁹⁶ J. Nicholason, “The South Ceylon Wesleyan Mission: Bangalore Conference Report” p. 236.

¹⁹⁷ A document of 1831 in the CMS Archives Quoted in R.F. Young and G.P.V. Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 62-63.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 63.

1831.¹⁹⁹ The Buddhists, expressing their grievances sent many such petitions to the government. These petitions in general,

(1) affirmed the petitioners' deep concern for the welfare of Buddhism which had prevailed as their and their ancestors' religion for over two thousand years; (2) referred to the pain of mind caused to the Buddhists as a result of what was being written and preached against their religion by Christian missionaries; (3) pointed out that Buddhists themselves made no similar attacks on Christianity; and (4) urged the government to uphold religious toleration by (a) ordering the withdrawal of offensive publications which had been issued, and (b) making a general proclamation that no religious group should issue publications which are likely or calculated to offend and injure the feelings of other religious groups.²⁰⁰

The 1815 petition against Clough was at first ignored by the governor, but when the monks persisted, he finally rebuked the missionaries.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, it was only in such isolated instances that the government advised the missionaries not to provoke the Buddhists. For instance, the Governor replied to a petition of 15 September 1826 on 28 November 1826 assuring the Buddhists that the missionaries "should not do bad actions."²⁰² Though the government issued a further warning to the missionaries after being "alarmed at the increasingly provocative nature of Christian propaganda,"²⁰³ the situation did not change. Hence on 27 December 1833, Governor Robert Horton wrote to Clough, after further protests by the Buddhists, requesting the withdrawal of a tract that he felt to have "the character of being promoted by hostile feelings." He also expressed his hope that in future religious controversies the "mode of warfare should be avoided."²⁰⁴

On another occasion in 1852, Governor Anderson described the writings of the archdeacon of Colombo, Benjamin Bailey as "language so violent and offensive as calculated to excite and exasperate the whole Buddhist population." He protested to the Colonial Office, and

¹⁹⁹ R.F.Young, "Imagined Beleaguerment", p. 177.

²⁰⁰ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 214.

²⁰¹ *Methodist Magazine*, XXXIV, p. 198.

²⁰² C.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon*, p. 123.

²⁰³ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 63.

²⁰⁴ Quoted in M.Y.Gooneratne, *English Literature in Ceylon 1815-1878*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1968, p. 91.

thus ensured that the archdeacon was compelled to resign his post.²⁰⁵ Yet, such interventions were few, and, generally, the Government was supportive of missionary activities than sympathetic to the grievances of the Buddhists²⁰⁶ for “the policy of the government was to support the work of the missionary organisations, and several government officials encouraged and supported the mission work.”²⁰⁷ In fact, “the early Governors of Ceylon, with the notable exception of Sir Edwards Barns... not only welcomed the Protestant missionaries, but even took personal interest in the development of missionary agents.”²⁰⁸

3. INCIPIENCE OF THE CONTROVERSIES

Concluding that the sending of petitions to the colonial government would not prevent provocative missionary activities, the Buddhists began to respond to missionary tracts by writing replies to them. Buddhist writings were of course limited to some extent until they acquired their own printing press in 1862. While they initially wrote their treatises on palm leaf papers, it is generally assumed that the Buddhist Christian controversies did not begin until the Buddhist press was established. It is argued that the earliest Buddhist replies were “sporadic attempts on the part of individual Buddhists to reply to missionary tracts,”²⁰⁹ and they “did not lead to an immediate and continuous debate between the two sides.”²¹⁰ Yet, since the palm leaf publications were nothing less than Buddhist replies to the Christian missionaries, they cannot be considered as anything other than an earliest aspect of the controversies. In this section, the emergence of the controversies will be surveyed in order

²⁰⁵ Since the archdeacon refused to be cautioned either by the Governor or by the bishop of Colombo Anderson was compelled to take such a course of action. The detailed account of this incident is documented in K.M.de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organisation in Ceylon*, pp. 116-121.

²⁰⁶ Cf. K.M.De Silva, “Buddhism and the British Government in Ceylon” pp. 91-159 and his *Social Policy and Missionary Organisations in Ceylon 1840-1855*.

²⁰⁷ C.N.V.Fernando, *A study of the History of Christianity in Ceylon in the British Period*, pp. 113-115.

²⁰⁸ A.Wickremeratne, *The Roots of Nationalism in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Karunaratne & Sons Ltd, (Year Not Mentioned), p. 5.

²⁰⁹ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 215.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 215.

to trace the path that eventually brought both Buddhists and Christians to confront each other in public debates.

(A) THE EARLIEST REPLIES OF THE BUDDHISTS

The earliest attempts of the Buddhists to write against missionary publications were the parodies that were fixed to trees along the way to the Buddhist temple at Kelaniya in 1826. The Methodist missionaries had printed five handbills, which they distributed to the pilgrims at the Kelaniya temple. These handbills contained a title and a corresponding biblical text. The Buddhists nailed the first four handbills to the trees, together with four parodies with the same titles.²¹¹ This response to the missionary publications only spurred the missionaries further, who, from 1828 onwards, “set themselves more seriously to the task of confuting Buddhism.”²¹² In response to the parodies, Clough wrote his controversial paper, *Reasons Why I Am Not A Buddhist*. Clough printed this in “a form of a posting bill and put it up in a conspicuous place, where it was read by great numbers and caused no little excitement.”²¹³ In response, a learned monk in the Matara district wrote a treatise to criticise this publication.²¹⁴ In fact, as a result of the publications of the missionaries, the Buddhists began to sense that “the missionaries were trying to destroy it [Buddhism] entirely.”²¹⁵ Hence, in a growing counter response, a “number of Buddhist monks wrote tracts and some Buddhists schools were established... in order to draw children away from Christian schools.”²¹⁶

Once the Buddhists began to answer the missionary tracts in writing, the real controversy between the Buddhists and Christians began to emerge. Both parties criticised each other's publications, and defended their faith vigorously until they came forward to have face-to-

²¹¹ These parodies are reproduced in Appendix II.

²¹² R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 290.

²¹³ *Ibid.* p. 288.

²¹⁴ John McKinny, *Missionary Letter*, 26 September 1831.

²¹⁵ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 76.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 72.

face debates in public. The CMS tract *A Christian's Reply to a Buddhist Objector*²¹⁷ is a rejoinder to a Buddhist reply dated 18 October 1831 to an earlier tract.²¹⁸ One of the CMS missionaries reported in 1844 that "a tract professing to prove the falsehood of Christianity has been written by some of their priests and one of them has been taking it about and reading it wherever he could get an opportunity to do so."²¹⁹

The Buddhist-Christian controversy at this stage lacked focus but not momentum... this was not so much a creative clash of ideas as it was simply ideas clashing, an intractable cycle of tract followed by *ola* [palm leaf writing] and *ola* followed by tract.²²⁰

(B) THE EMERGING OBJECTIONS OF THE BUDDHIST

The Buddhist-Christian controversies took a dramatic turn in 1848 when Daniel Gogerly²²¹ published his *Kristiyani Prajnapti* (Institutes of the Christian Religion), a Sinhalese treatise of 144 pages criticising Buddhism and defending Christianity. This "immediately superseded all the previous polemical writings issued by the missionary presses and sounded the effective beginnings of the Christian Buddhist controversy,"²²² for it "touched off the first serious opposition to Christianity on the part of Buddhism,"²²³ and subsequently brought the two parties together in face-to-face confrontations. *Kristiyani Prajnapti* was considered a "much dreaded book" by the Buddhists and as Hardy observed

²¹⁷ A Sinhalese publication by the CMS press at Kotte in 1834.

²¹⁸ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 215.

²¹⁹ CMS missionary G.Trimnell's letter dated 17.06.1844, quoted in R.F.Young and G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 77.

²²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 77.

²²¹ Born in 1792 Daniel J.Gogerely came to Sri-Lanka in 1817 as a printer to the Wesleyan Mission. Later in 1830 he was ordained and began his ministry at Dondra (near Matara) and became the chairman of the Methodist mission. His ministry in Sri Lanka extended for 45 years without any interruption. With the help of the Buddhist monks he studied Pali. "The acquisition of the original texts of Theravada Buddhism and the articulation of a critique of them in a Christian perspective was primarily Gogerly's achievement" (R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 81). In fact, "the scholarship of Gogerly, moulded by his sound knowledge of Pali, marked a new stage in the Buddhist-missionary encounter, one in which textual evidence was used, or perhaps abused, to further the missionary cause" (E.J.Harris, "Crisis and Competition" p. 9). Apart from this Gogerly played a significant role in creating the school system that has endowed Sri Lanka with the highest literacy rate in South Asia.

²²² K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese society*, p. 217.

²²³ W.J.T.Small, *History of the Methodist Church*, p. 159.

in 1864, "there is now scarcely a single publication issued from the Buddhist press in which there is not some notice of it."²²⁴

This was a trenchant and provocative critique of Buddhism... that galvanised the revivalist [Buddhist] leadership as well as the laity at large as no other tract or pamphlet of the Christians ever had.²²⁵

After its first publication in 1848, *Kristiyani Prajnapti* was reissued in 1849 and 1853. In 1857 it was issued again at the rate of 2000 copies for each edition. In 1862, Gogerly added to it a long introduction of 78 pages, an elaboration of some of the ideas already expressed in part I of the original edition called *Proofs that Buddhism is Not a True Religion*.²²⁶ In 1861 another 7000 copies were printed. It was reported that large number of Buddhists forsook their religion and embraced Christianity after reading it.²²⁷ In fact, these conversions were "an eye-opener to the high priests of the Buddhist church,"²²⁸ and consequently they "organised themselves into a strong opposition to react against these publications."²²⁹

Although the title of Gogerly's publication suggests that it was rather for the instruction of Christians than an attack on Buddhism, the book contains an exposition of Buddhism based on the author's research on the Pali canon. Apart from his expositions of Christian doctrines, Gogerly made a comparison of Buddhist and Christian doctrines in relation to essential theological issues. The aim of this comparison was to "refute the Buddhist doctrines and to establish the truth of the Christian."²³⁰ Hence, the missionaries rejoiced,

²²⁴ S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 292.

²²⁵ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Someratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 45.

²²⁶ T.Kariyawasam gives different dates for D.J.Gogerly's publication. Accordingly the second Sinhalese edition was published in 1861. In Sinhalese 5000 copies and 1000 in English (*Religious Activities*, p. 189).

²²⁷ Y.Pannananda, *Sri Sumangala Caritaya, Vol.II*. Colombo: Lake House Publishers, 1947, p. 685.

²²⁸ T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*. p. 190.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 190.

²³⁰ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 217.

“here we have all the arguments needed to disprove certain positions that are declared to have been laid down by Buddha.”²³¹

Gogerly's main purpose was to lay before the Sinhalese the true teachings of the Buddha, because he believed that when they really understood them they would realise what nonsense they were, and so Buddhism would lose its hold on the country.²³²

In *Kristiyani Prajnapti* Gogerly had pointed out the inconsistencies between the canonical teachings and the contemporary Buddhist practice and beliefs.²³³ In contradistinction to the canonical teachings, the Buddhists of that time venerated and arguably even worshipped the Buddha²³⁴ and believed in the transmigration of souls.²³⁵ In addition to this, on the basis of the scientific discovery concerning the shape of the globe, Gogerly had also criticised the Buddhist cosmology.²³⁶ Gogerly challenged the Buddhists:

And you Buddhists! Who give alms to the priests, endow temples, adorn and worship the images of Buddha, and think that you thus multiply meritorious actions, Do you not expect that you, yourself, will receive the reward? That the soul now living in your

²³¹ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 293.

²³² W.J.T.Small, *History of the Methodist Church*, p. 157.

²³³ A.S.Bishop, who collected and published Gogerly's writings, has remarked, in *Kristiyani Prajnapti* Gogerly “is laboriously bringing to light the actual text of the Buddhist scriptures, and allowing the text itself to speak for him” (*Ceylon Buddhism: Being the Collected Writings of Daniel J. Gogerly. Vol.I.* Colombo/London: Wesleyan Mission Press/ Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1908, p. XI).

²³⁴ J.Selkirk described a visit to a Buddhist temple in 1827 in which he had a conversation with a Buddhist monk. “I asked the priest if the people were worshipping the image that was placed there (pointing to it). He said they were, and that English people worshipped Jesus Christ, and the Sinhalese people worshipped Buddha” (*Recollections of Ceylon*, pp. 378-379). E.J.Harris however, remarks, “it was rare for a missionary at this stage... to realise that the Buddha image was not worshiped in the Christian sense of the word” (*Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 111). Nevertheless, “Sinhalese Buddhists state that their religion was founded by the Buddha, who was a human being and is now dead. Cognitively this position is held by every Buddhist from the most learned monk to the most ignorant layman. Yet they usually behave as if the Buddha appears to them as a powerful and omnibenevolent god, a supreme being who is still in some way present and aware... the demeanour of the average worshipper is reminiscent of theistic devotion rather than of philosophic contemplation” (“The Consecration of a Buddhist Image” in *Journal of Asian Studies*. 26 (1966), p. 23).

²³⁵ Therefore, the Buddhists revivalists of the nineteenth century strove to purify Buddhism by eliminating such alien precepts and practices. More will be said about this in Chapter Three.

²³⁶ According to Buddhist cosmology, the earth is a vastly extent plain, ever at rest, and immovable; founded on an equal extend of waters, and these upon air, which is itself either infinite or founded on nothing. The primary feature of this cosmography is the earth as a flat with “Mount Meru” situated at its centre, wider by far at its tip than its base, and encircled by seven concentric oceans and continents. The circumference of the whole is 36,103,500 miles, the rim itself being composed of a rock called the *cakkavala*, after which the system is named. Above this, and at an elevation only ten miles distant from each other, the sun and moon revolve on a horizontal plane at the same level as Meru's peak. (S.Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism: In its Modern Development*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1880, p. 1-35). The nineteenth-century Buddhist defence of this in the controversies is mentioned in the following chapter.

body will after death enter a new body and be happy in one of the heavens? Awake from your dream! For if Buddhism be true you are deceiving yourselves.²³⁷

In sophistication of argument *Kristiyani Prajnapti* was a notable departure from the Christian literature that had appeared thus far. Instead of appeals to emotion, it made a characteristically 'enlightenment appeal' to 'evidences' and 'proofs' claiming superiority for Christianity on intellectual plane. In fact, this was "inspired partly by William Paley's evidences of Christianity."²³⁸ Christian missionaries repeatedly challenged the Buddhists to disprove, if they could, the main thesis of Gogerly's work. In addition to the book, several small tracts based on it were circulated widely challenging the Buddhists to disprove Gogerly's thesis. The missionaries made frequent quotations from this book in their sermons.

The main controversy around *Kristiyani Prajnapti* was directed against the chapter in which Gogerly had attempted to prove, from the canonical texts,²³⁹ that Buddha was not omniscient.²⁴⁰ The Buddhist monks responded by denying the genuineness of the passage cited by Gogerly by questioning his competence in Pali, and denying that the entreaty of Sahmaptai had occurred thrice on which Gogerly had based his thesis.²⁴¹ In 1861, Bambarande Revata, the incumbent monk of the Amarapura temple at Gotatuva composed a reply to *Kristiyani Prajnapti* in *ola*, consisting of thirty folios, but a critique of the first three pages of the book only. Revata accused Gogerly of deliberate falsification:

²³⁷ D.J.Gogerly, *The Evidence and Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1885. pp. 73-74.

²³⁸ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 217.

²³⁹ Gogerly has cited a passage in the Mahawaga of the Vinaya Pitaka 1.5-1.6.8.

²⁴⁰ D.J.Gogerly, *The Evidence and Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, p. 2. According to Gogerly, the Pali *sabbannu* and its Sinhalese cognate *sarvajna* mean "he who knows all things". In fact Gogerly had "imposed on the Pali canon a philosophical model of omniscience more congenial to the Judeo-Christian tradition than to Buddhism" (R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*. p. 85).

²⁴¹ Since Gogerly's Buddhist Scriptures were his own copy from the manuscripts that he found in the temple libraries in the Matara area, the accuracy of his citations naturally depended on the reliability of his manuscripts. Even though only fragments are extant Young and Somaratna remark that "in comparing the citations in the *Prajnapti* with the editions of the Pali Text Society we have discovered only minor discrepancies in a few instances" (*Vain Debates*, p. 82).

The seditious nature of the book is manifest when the author of [the] *Prajñapti* has deliberately omitted some portions of [the] *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the first discourse of Buddha, to substantiate his mythical views on Buddhism.²⁴²

However, he did not continue his critique beyond the third page of *Kristyāni Prajñapti* due to the non-availability of a printing press to promote the Buddhist cause. Revata's criticism cites many examples to show that Gogerly is not well versed in the Pali language.²⁴³

In March 1862, a considerable number of Buddhists led by some monks, assembled at Kotte and demanded of the resident CMS missionary, John Haslam, that he should verify the quotations made in Gogerly's book from their own Pali books. Although a day was appointed for this purpose, the monks did not come to meet the Christians in a public controversy. Therefore Gogerly with the help of Pandit Batuvantudave (1819-1892), an ex-monk, and a Pali scholar²⁴⁴ conveyed to the audience that Pali citations in his *Kristyāni Prajñapti* were rendered correctly.²⁴⁵ During this period Batuvantudave was employed at one of the Methodist schools, and had been engaged in proofreading Gogerly's *Kristyāni Prajñapti*. But when he came to the section in which Buddha's omniscience is allegedly disproved, he declined to continue the job, claiming that the text was faulty, and was

²⁴² Quoted in T.Kariywasam, *Religious Activities*. p. 191.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 192. But Gogerly's competence in Pali language is confirmed by T.W.Rhys Davids, the founder of Pali Text Society. In his foreword to Gogerly's writings he has stated, "so wide a range of knowledge, and such sound and sober judgement that his conclusions were far ahead of any previous writings on [the Buddhism of the Pali canon] and have been the basis of much of the best that has been put forward since" (A.S.Bishop, ed. *Ceylon Buddhism*, p. VIII). In recent times Heinz Bechert has noted that Gogerly's were "the first detailed and basically correct accounts of the corpus of Buddhistic teaching on the basis of the Pali sources. ("Contradictions in Sinhalese Buddhism" in *Contributions to Asian Studies Vol.4*. Bardwell Smith, ed., Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1973, p. 189). But the Buddhists considered him as "an unscrupulous villain who was culpably ignorant of Buddhism and notoriously incompetent in matters where skill in Pali was concerned" (R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 80).

²⁴⁴ Pandit Batuvantudave was born in a southern village near Galle in 1819. He had his primary education in a CMS school at Baddegama. Later he studied at the Kotte Temple, received higher ordination in 1840, and took charge of a temple near Kolonnawa. Around 1844 he studied Sanskrit. Due to ill health he latter disrobed but continued to remain steadfast as a committed Buddhist. As with the common practice of the Lay Buddhist leaders of that time Batuvantudave married a Christian woman. Batuvantudave did much to promote institutional religion and foster the development of Sinhalese literature. Batuvantudave, along with his teacher monk Walane Siddhartha (1811-1868), and some other Buddhist laymen, was among those who launched the first Sinhala newspaper of the Buddhists, the *Lak Mini Pahana* [The Gemmed Lamp of Ceylon], on the 11 September 1862. Batuvantudave had been a teacher to the monk Hikkaduwa Sumangala and also to Daniel Gogerly (L.W.de Silva, *Batuvantudava Caritaya*, 1911).

²⁴⁵ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, p. 293.

consequently dismissed from his teaching post. Hence in August 1862, Batuvantudave composed a refutation of *Kristyani Prajnapti*.²⁴⁶ In 1863, he established a printing press in Colombo, and published his first publication *Satyartha Pradipika* (The Lamp of True Meaning) in December.²⁴⁷ Batuvantudave's refutation *Kristyani Prajnapti Khandanaya* (The Tearing Asunder of *Kristyani Prajnapti*) is the earliest Buddhist written reply to Gogerly's thesis. As he was not convinced of the reliability of the Pali citations in *Kristyani Prajnapti*, he continued to raise this issue, and, in 1863, brought the matter before a public confrontation in Galle.

In the Galle confrontation of 1863, the monks of "the neighbourhood of Galle challenged the Christians to prove that Gogerly's arguments against the omniscience of Buddha were well founded."²⁴⁸ The monks objected that Gogerly had cited a questionable manuscript of the *Mahavagga* that included the thrice-repeated entreaty of the Brahma *Sahampati* to the Buddha. David de Silva,²⁴⁹ defending Gogerly's rendering, produced Gogerly's own manuscript of the *Mahavagga*, and compared it with one he had obtained from a temple at Ratgama in which the disputed passage did not appear. De Silva pointed out that the Ratgama manuscript "appeared to have been emended and showed the relevant lines that had been clumsily rewritten in a different hand."²⁵⁰ However, when Gogerly's manuscript was examined, it was pronounced to be "grammatically incorrect" by the monks. The monks announced that they were prepared to exhibit fourteen manuscripts of the *Mahavagga* in which *Sahampati* entreated the Buddha only once. De Silva arranged another meeting in Colombo in July to settle the issue. No monks attended this meeting, and in their absence de Silva displayed manuscripts of *Mahapadana Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*, in which Brahma *Sahampati* is also said to have made three entreaties to Vipassi, a

²⁴⁶ L.W.de Silva, *Batuvantudava Caritaya*, p. 215.

²⁴⁷ T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, p. 216).

²⁴⁸ John Scott, *Missionary Letter*, 18 August 1863.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Chapter Two, Footnote: 5.

²⁵⁰ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 90.

former Buddha.²⁵¹ It is reported that de Silva defended the correctness of Gogerly's translation for two hours.²⁵² Nevertheless the Buddhists continued to raise this issue until the Buddhist canon was revised in 1867.²⁵³

(C) THE ENTRANCE OF THE BUDDHIST PRESS

As a result of the anti-Buddhist literature flooding the country, the Buddhist monks realised the need to use the same method to counteract the missionary publications and put a stop to conversions. They were aware that the majority of the converts had become Christians due to the reading of missionary publications. The monks also realised that if missionary publications continued to undermine Buddhism, "the Buddhist church will perish."²⁵⁴ In 1862, Gunananda pointed out the approaching danger to Buddhism, and founded a Society to defend Buddhism.²⁵⁵ He stressed the urgency of having a printing press, and made an appeal to the Buddhists saying,

The heathen with a view of extirpating religious truth, misunderstanding the doctrine of Buddha, have caused books to be printed and circulated setting forth therein many other misconceptions. If these false statements be established, many an ignorant one will forsake Buddhism and embrace heathen doctrines and be led in the way of destruction. Under these circumstances, that which is proper to be done by us is to answer the objections brought forward by these heathens against our faith and to show forth the universal truth of Buddhism as well as the fallacy of heathenism. This cannot be done but by establishing a printing press.²⁵⁶

In the mean time, Hikkaduwa Sumangala also felt the need to have a press to print a reply to Gogerly's thesis. With the help of other monks and laity, he founded a press at Galle in

²⁵¹ J.Nicholson, *South Ceylon Wesleyan Mission*, p. 239. The Majjhima Nikaya (1.168-69), the Samyutta Nikaya (1.137-38), and the Buddhavamsa-atthakatha (11-12) all mention only one entreaty. The Vinaya texts (Mahavagga and Mahapadanna) on the other hand mention three entreaties. Three entreaties are also found in the Mahavastu and the Lalitavistara.

²⁵² George Baugh, *Missionary Letter*, 31 July 1863.

²⁵³ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 91.

²⁵⁴ The 1865 report of the Buddhist press quoted in T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, p. 199.

²⁵⁵ Gunananda named his organisation as The Society for Propagation of Buddhism, imitating the name of a Christian missionary organisation. More will be said on such Buddhist imitations of Christianity in Chapter Three.

²⁵⁶ Quoted in R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 134.

1862.²⁵⁷ In the same year, Gunananda published a reply to Gogerly's *Kristyani Prajnapti* called *Durlabdhi Vinodaniya* (Heretical Amusement). He printed this at two different Christian presses without allowing either press to realise what they were publishing.²⁵⁸ Nevertheless the Christians discovered this very soon, and ridiculed their cunning efforts. It began as a monthly periodical criticising Christianity and extolling Buddhism. Gogerly started a rival periodical in July 1862 called *Suddharma Prakaranaya* (Explanation of the True Religion). While the exchanges of these two periodicals were going on, in October,²⁵⁹ the Hikkaduve Sumangala from Galle, walked into the fray, with the first issue of his magazine *Sudarsanaya* (Good Appearance),²⁶⁰ criticising *Kristyani Prajnapti* and other Christian publications. In the first issue, the editorial column referred to the missionary criticisms of Buddhism, and remarked that these abusive statements had reached an unbearable point, and it was the duty of the Buddhists to be alert to the situation.²⁶¹ In November, Gunananda published his *Kristiani Vada Mardanaya* (The Suppression of Christianity)²⁶² in his own press at Colombo.²⁶³ Since Gogerly had criticised the omniscience of Buddha, Gunananda named his press *Sarvajna* (Omniscient One, i.e. the Buddha) Press. *Kristiani Vada Mardanaya* was not only a reply to Gogerly, but also a composition that extolled Buddhism as true and Christianity as false by refuting the

²⁵⁷ The *Lankopakara* (Succour of Lanka) Press at Galle was established in 1862. The monk Bulathgama Sumana was instrumental in this effort. It is pointed out that he was one of the earliest to realise the need for the establishment of a printing press to combat missionary propaganda. Residing in a temple at Galle, Bulathgama Sumana collected funds not only from people in Galle and its environs but also from rich landowners in remote parts of the island. Finding these donations inadequate, he finally appealed for support, and got it, from the king of Siam, with whom he had been acquainted while studying in that country. Bulathgama Sumana, though he belonged to the Amarapura fraternity was able to obtain the co-operation of the monks of other fraternities in his effort to establish a press. Hence it became a united Buddhist effort (K.Pannasekhara, *Sinhala Puvatpat Sangara Itihaasaya. Vol.I.* Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., 1965, p. 101-104).

²⁵⁸ The matter was composed in one press at Slave Island and printed at in another press at Valikanda.

²⁵⁹ Both Malalgoda and Kariyawasam are in agreement with this date.

²⁶⁰ Twelve issues of this magazine were published in the subsequent months (T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, p. 205).

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 203.

²⁶² Two issues were published under this title (*Ibid.* p. 205).

²⁶³ This first Buddhist press at Colombo originally belonged to the CMS missionaries at Kotte. They, for over three decades, extensively published pro-Christian and anti-Buddhist works. In 1855, the press was sold to a person who worked in the press for some time and in 1862, it became the property of the Buddhist monk Gunananda. The missionaries latter lamented: "It is a sad fact, that this press, which had been so long instrumental in diffusing truth and knowledge, was, soon after its transference to other hands, used in

statements of Gogerly.²⁶⁴ It has been estimated that during the first two years after its inception, the Buddhist Press at Galle printed 39,665 books in defence of Buddhism.²⁶⁵

The Buddhist presses were set up mainly "to combat Christian literary warfare."²⁶⁶ Hence this brought a "historic transformation of the Buddhist-Christian controversy."²⁶⁷ According to the missionaries, the first pamphlets and tracts that came out of the Buddhist presses were of a "scurrilous and blasphemous" nature.²⁶⁸ Later publications were of a more moderate tone, even though they continued to put forward arguments to discredit Christianity. In 1862, Gogerly deplored the Buddhist opposition in these terms:

They have in Colombo a weekly lecture in fierce opposition to Christianity and publish tracts of a most virulent nature, and in addition placard the walls... with written papers stating with other abusive matters, that ... it will be preferable to worship the crows that fly through the air or the dogs that run barking through the streets than to worship Jehovah and Jesus Christ whom they declare to be dangerous devils.²⁶⁹

In the subsequent years, the claims and counter-claims of Buddhism and Christianity were argued out mainly through periodical publications, each generally lasting about a year, sometimes less, to be followed immediately afterwards by another under a different name but containing the same material.

Most of the literature written by the admirers of both religious groups could not be considered as serious and scholastical work on the respective religions but were merely pamphlets produced under fanatical feeling. The illogical and irrational accounts of the writers were unable to provide either the Buddhists or the Christians a

opposition to Christianity, and that from it came forth the first of the Buddhist tracts, naturally filled with blasphemy."

²⁶⁴ T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, p. 203. The first issue of this periodical ends with saying, "some ignorant, false viewed sinners who help to grow groves of sin on the way to heaven, like the venomous teeth of a cobra, have composed and circulated books which criticise and falsify the Lord Buddha, His teachings and His disciples... Now the uncritical people who have deserted the Buddhistic Church believing in the absurd fallacies of unscrupulous Christian sinners will suffer in hell" (*Ibid.* pp. 204-205).

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 223.

²⁶⁶ K.N.O.Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion and Ethnic Assertiveness*, p. 99.

²⁶⁷ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 113.

²⁶⁸ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 161.

²⁶⁹ D.J.Gogerly, *Missionary Letter*, 17 June 1862.

strong intellectual foundation on which they could stand... Superficial analysis of this calibre did not provide any group with firm base for the new religious struggle.²⁷⁰

From the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism came forth *Kristiyani Vada Mardanaya* (The Suppression of Christianity 1862-1863) and *Samyak Darsanaya* (Correct View of Opinion 1863-1864) both written and published by Gunananda. From the Galle press, three periodicals by Sumangala appeared. In 1863, *Bauddha Vaksaraya* (Essence of Buddhist Sayings), in 1864, *Sumati Samgrahaya* (Compilation of Kind Disposition) and, in 1864-1865, *Labdhi Tulava* (Sectarian Scale). A Buddhist newspaper called *Lakminipahana* (The Gemmed Lamp of Ceylon) issued its first paper on the 11 September 1862.²⁷¹ On the other side, the Methodist missionaries published *Bauddha Vakya Khandanaya* (Demolishing of Buddhists Sentences 1863) and *Satya Dvajaya* (True Human Victory 1863-1864) as magazines, and, in 1863, two Christian newspapers appeared as *Arunodaya* (Morning Twilight), a weekly newspaper by Roman Catholics, on 1 August 1863 for six months. The second Christian newspaper was named as *Lakirivikirana* (The Rays of the Sun of Lanka). The Dutch Reformed Church published *Subharanci Horanava* (The Sound of Salvation) in 1864. The same year the Methodist mission published *Wesleyan Pravrtti*. (Wesleyan News). The Buddhists printed a monthly journal *Labdhi Tulava* in October 1864, and *Sumati Sangrahaya*. Only three volumes of each magazine were published.

The subjects discussed in the columns of these periodicals were broadly akin to those raised by Gogerly in *Kristiyani Prajnapti*.... But as the controversy progressed, the actual range of topics widened, and the number of arguments and counter arguments multiplied. The Buddhists, taking their cue from the Christians, devoted as much of their effort to attacking the religion of their opponents as to defending their own.²⁷²

In 1866, *Gnatha Pradipaya* (Lamp of Wise Thought), a new newspaper, began circulation.²⁷³ In 1882, two Buddhist-Sinhalese newspapers were started in order to “lessen

²⁷⁰ T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, pp. 205-206.

²⁷¹ Though originally it was started as a non-religious paper latter become a Buddhist paper.

²⁷² K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 221.

²⁷³ S.G.Perera, *History of Ceylon Vol: II*, p. 149.

missionary effort and influence.”²⁷⁴ In addition, many tracts were circulated by the Buddhists detailing the so-called contradictory passages in the Gospel narratives.²⁷⁵ Piyadasa Sirisena, a popular novelist, made his contribution with novels in which he advocated a return to the old religion and the old customs and mode of life.²⁷⁶ His main objective was to convert Sinhalese Christians back to Buddhism and resuscitate the dying culture of the people.²⁷⁷ By the end of 1880, the Sinhalese newspaper *Sarasavi Sandarasa* (Moon Beam of Speech) was started to carry on Buddhist propaganda, and an English supplement titled *The Buddhist* was added to it. In 1863 the Tract Society made mention “of a strong influential movement of the Buddhists against Christianity”, and it was stated that “lectures and tracts, opposing the statements in the Bible and the entire agency of missions were started” in that period.²⁷⁸ The anti-Christian literature that emanated from Colombo and Galle reached the central parts of the country too. Hence the CMS missionaries of that vicinity wrote that “the Buddhist tracts had been a good deal read, and their objections and blasphemies were apparently considered unanswerable.”²⁷⁹ They said “the Spirit of opposition... is kept alive by the circulation of Buddhist tracts.”²⁸⁰ In the words of Lapham, a Baptist missionary,

Buddhist opposition is now an active and organised force, which must be reckoned with. In the Buddhist newspapers have appeared columns of print against us.²⁸¹

The missionaries were of course optimistic about the outcome of the controversies.²⁸² They “believed that the Buddhist system of belief was so absurd that in an open contest between

²⁷⁴ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*, p. 130.

²⁷⁵ *Tract Society Report* 1882, p. 163.

²⁷⁶ S.G.Perera, *History of Ceylon Vol:II*, pp. 195-196.

²⁷⁷ E.R.Sarathchandra, *The Sinhalese Novel*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Company, 1950, p. 41.

²⁷⁸ *Tract Society Report*, 1863, p. 121.

²⁷⁹ John I. Jones, *Missionary Letter*, 30 September 1863, Quoted in R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 139.

²⁸⁰ Edward Higgen, *Missionary Letter*, 20 February 1866, Quoted in *Ibid.* p. 139.

²⁸¹ Quoted in C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period*, p.131.

²⁸² This is characteristic of the nineteenth-century Christian missionaries. As D. King has remarked, the missionaries were “overestimated their success, and in relation to the prospects of the missionary cause, allowed themselves to indulge in hopes which facts have not justified” (*The State and Progress of Jamaica*, p.130).

the two faiths Christianity would prove its superiority and would prevail.”²⁸³ Thus Hardy asserted, that “the cross must triumph... the time will come when the *wihara* will be deserted, the *dagoba* unhonoured, and the *banna* unread.”²⁸⁴ The missionaries dreamt that such a Christianised society would be established in Sri Lanka subsequent to the controversies.²⁸⁵ Hence, Hardy wrote:

A controversy, of great interest, has recently commenced in Ceylon, between the Christians and Buddhists. The priests have purchased presses and type, and possess printing establishments of their own... Tracts pamphlets, and serials issue in large number from the Buddhist presses... I have formed bright anticipation as to the future. There can be no doubt as to the result of the contest now carried on; for although it may be prolonged and severe, it must end in the total discomfiture of those who have arisen against the Lord and his Christ, and in the renunciation of the atheist creed that now mars the happiness, and stays the enlightenment of so many of the dwellers in Lanka.²⁸⁶

Nevertheless as this chapter has shown, once the Buddhist monks were able to answer the missionary criticism, the hopes of the missionaries began to diminish and they faced formidable opposition to their mission. As the literature controversy reached its peak the Buddhists and Christians faced each other in public platforms, which started the historic debates between both parties. These debates will be analysed in the following chapter.

²⁸³ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 76.

²⁸⁴ R.S.Hardy, *The Sacred Books of Buddhists Compared with History and Modern Science*, pp.162-163.

²⁸⁵ Similarly in India, the “European missionaries and English colonial administrators asserted that Hinduism and Animism would die away soon, and that the whole nation could be civilised and Christianised with the introduction of English education” (J.S.Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission*, p. xviii).

²⁸⁶ R.S.Hardy, *The Legends and Theories of the Buddhists*, pp. VIII – IX.

CHAPTER TWO

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONTROVERSIES

The Buddhist-Christian controversies continued for a considerable time in print and public sermons, till both parties came forward to have face-to-face confrontations in public debates. As pointed out in the previous chapter, after the publication of Daniel Gogerly's *Kristyani Prajnapti*, the focus of Buddhist Christian controversy was mainly centred on it. Numerous publications were issued from both religious presses either defending or criticising the issues raised in that volume. Even when the public debates were in progress, Gogerly's publication did not lose its importance although some new topics were debated in the controversies. The Buddhists and Christians had five major public debates in addition to several other minor confrontations in the later part of the nineteenth century. This chapter is an analytical survey of the major controversies, with a view to finding out their implications in relation to the Christian mission in Buddhist Sri Lanka.

1. EMERGENCE OF THE PUBLIC DEBATES

As pointed out in the previous chapter, after the publication of Gogerly's *Kristyani Prajnapti*, the Buddhists and Christians were actively involved in defending their religion and condemning their opponent's faith. The Christians were optimistic that in a face-to-face confrontation they could easily refute Buddhism and demonstrate the truth of Christianity to the Buddhists.¹ Hence they provoked the Buddhists with their literature and discourses, which ultimately forced the Buddhists to have public debates with Christians.

¹ Cf. Chapter One, pp. 57-58.

The first major debate between the Buddhists and Christians took place in February 1865 at Baddegama, a small village about twelve miles to the north of Galle.² In 1864, a Buddhist novice and some Christians had engaged in discussion about the relative merits of their two religions at Baddegama village, which led to a further encounter at a Buddhist temple in Gotatuva. The flood of polemical literature and public speeches of both religious leaders seems to have created a desire in the minds of the laity to find out which was the true religion.³ Perhaps this must have been the reason for people to gather at the sites of the public debates in large numbers. The Christians, under the leadership of CMS missionary George Parsons, met a large group of Buddhist monks and lay people at Gotatuva, but the Buddhists were not prepared to engage in a controversy on that day. A whole week in February, therefore, was set aside by both parties to have public debates. This was an indication of the fact that the Buddhists always took sufficient time to prepare themselves before they entered into these debates. Further, the Buddhist monks were competent debaters, whose debating skills were sharpened by years of inter-denominational disputes prior to the Buddhist-Christian controversies.⁴ The Christians, however, were overconfident about their victory, hurried into the controversies and consequently found it unexpectedly difficult to defeat the Buddhists and convince them about the Christian faith.

On the appointed day, 8 February 1864, Parsons, with David de Silva of the Methodist mission who played the major role in the subsequent controversies,⁵ and some other

² It was a CMS missionary centre, and the work commenced there in 1818 (J.Selkirk, *Recollection of Ceylon*. New Delhi: Navrang Publishers, 1993, pp. 229-268.

³ G.Parsons, *Missionary Letter*, 16 February 1865 Quoted in R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates: Buddhist Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon*. Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996, p. 142.

⁴ Prior to the Buddhist-Christian controversies, the Buddhist monks had been involved in their own internal ecclesiastical controversies and in a series of literary debates known as the "Sav Sat Dam" controversy. Among the ecclesiastical controversies, the "Sima Sankara" (1831 onwards) and "Adhikamasa" (1851 onwards) were important debates, which concerned the authentication of practices relating to certain ecclesiastical rituals. "Sav Sat Dam" was a literary controversy, which was carried out through letters published in the recently published Sinhalese periodicals in the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth-century. (K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 181-183).

⁵ David de Silva was born in 1817 at Valigama, was converted to Christianity in 1834, and began his ministry in 1841. His training under D.J.Gogerly had made him a critic of Buddhism and eventually he became the

Christians met the Buddhists at the riverside government Rest House below Church Hill.⁶ The Buddhists were gathered under the leadership of two prominent monks of the Southern district of Sri Lanka, Bulatgama Sumanatissa and Hikkaduve Sumangala. There were about two thousand Buddhist laity, outnumbering Christians by a ratio of ten to one, gathered to see both parties defending their religion in public.⁷

(A) CRUCIAL ISSUES OF THE FIRST DEBATE

On the first day, the Buddhist speeches consisted only of citations from the Bible, concerning whether or not Jehovah could be considered omniscient, in retaliation of Gogerly's criticism of the Buddha. They pointed out that the biblical verses used to defend the omniscience of Jehovah are contradicted by the passages in which he is depicted as a repenting god.⁸ Parsons, however, defended Jehovah's all-knowing capability against the Buddhist allegations by reading an article published in the magazine *The Banner of Truth* by David de Silva in the previous year, and concluded with counter-arguments against the Buddha's omniscience that were taken from Gogerly's *Kristyani Prajnapti*.⁹ Finally, the monk Hikkaduve declared that the Buddha's omniscience was a soteriologically relevant awareness, i.e. the Buddha became aware of specific things in the range of knowables successively in contrast with the biblical notion of an all-knowing capability from the beginning.¹⁰

In the nineteenth-century religious debates, the omniscience of Jehovah became an important subject due mainly to Gogerly's accusation that Buddha's knowlegge was

chief spokesmen in the Buddhist-Christian controversies. De Silva died in 1874 soon after the famous Panadura debate. It is reported that the Panadura debate was a great tax on his strength. (*The Ceylon Friend*, March 1874, pp. 33-37).

⁶ The hill on which the CMS church was built was known as Church Hill.

⁷ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 142; T.S.Dharmabandu, *Pancha Maha Vadaya*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., 1992, pp. 155-159.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 159-161.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 161-167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 167-171.

limited. It was, however, not Gogerly's intention to give such a prominent place to this theological concept before he began to study Buddhism. However, when he studied the Buddhist texts, he began to doubt the knowledge of the Buddha in terms of his Christian theological background. He expected the Buddha to be attributed with omniscience in the traditional Christian theological sense.¹¹ Since deity worship was a major aspect of the popular Buddhism at that time, and the Buddha was also worshipped as a god,¹² Gogerly expected the Buddha to be regarded as omniscient. Hence when he discovered that the Buddha was unable to know certain things, he assumed that by highlighting this he could prove that Buddhism was not a true religion. Following in the footsteps of Gogerly, other Christians too challenged the Buddhists on this issue. However, they encountered unexpected criticism against the omniscience of Jehovah, and found it difficult even to defend their own concepts and disprove the Buddhists' arguments. Consequently, the Buddhists, instead of doubting the omniscience of the Buddha, denied and even denounced the claims made by Christians about the knowledge of Jehovah. Hence, this episode is a reminder that challenging a concept or a doctrine of other religions just to disprove and condemn it always brings similar criticisms, and even unanswerable arguments against one's own faith.

On the second day, the speech of the Buddhists emphasised that the blood sacrifices of the Old Testament demonstrate that Jehovah was a bloodthirsty evil spirit, seething with anger, greed and delusion.¹³ The Buddhists often criticised Jehovah in this manner, and this is a recurring argument in the nineteenth-century controversies. In fact, this was the natural reaction of the Buddhists against the Christian depiction of Buddha as a devil.¹⁴ Since the

¹¹ In traditional Christian theology, divine omniscience is defined, as 'God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act.'

¹² Evidence for this is cited in Chapter Three in relation to the nineteenth-century Buddhist revival. Since the Buddhists worshipped the Buddha and other deities, the revivalists strove to purify their contemporaries' religious practices by removing such theistic elements. See also the Footnote 238 in Chapter One.

¹³ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 144.

¹⁴ Cf. Chapter One, p. 29.

missionaries condemned Buddhism as demonism, the Buddhists were provoked to criticise Jehovah in the same manner. In this way the missionaries reaped what they sowed in Sri Lanka.

In their confrontations with Christians, the Buddhists often used then current Western biblical critical scholarship to their advantage. Hence, in the Baddegama controversy, the reliability of Leviticus 8:4 was questioned on the grounds of the space for the entire congregation to gather in front of the tabernacle according to God's commandment, utilising a point made in the 1862 edition of J.W.Colenso's critical study of the Pentateuch.¹⁵ Even prior to this debate, the Buddhists had used Colenso as their authority on biblical scholarship. In fact, "the name Colenso became a veritable household byword among Buddhists that placed the controversy on a strangely new footing."¹⁶ There were several references to it in the Buddhist polemical literature of that period. It was Hikkaduve who introduced Colenso to the Buddhists in his publications. In 1872, D.P.Vijayasinha, founder of a *dhammasabha* (preaching hall) in Kegalla, began to translate excerpts from Colenso's writings into Sinhalese and published a series of pamphlets called *Vibhajjavadaya*.¹⁷ The Buddhists were happy to point out that "eminent bishops of the Christian religion state it as their deliberate conviction that the narratives of the Bible are false and incredible."¹⁸ But the missionaries were "ill-prepared to grapple with the implications... of biblical criticism."¹⁹ Even though the Methodist missionary Spence Hardy had adopted Colenso's methodology to criticise the Pali canon of Buddhism,²⁰ it

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 144-145. J. William Colenso (1814-1883) was an Anglican Bishop of Natal (Bishop to the Zulus), and his first volume of *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* was published in 1862.

¹⁶ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 121.

¹⁷ K.Pannasekhara, *Sinhala Puvatpat Sangara Itihasaya Vol.I*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., 1965, p. 275.

¹⁸ Quoted in R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 123.

²⁰ R.S.Hardy started his thesis entitled *Buddhism Not Historically True*. This was published as *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists Compared with History and Modern Science* in 1863, and in 1865 in Sinhalese as *Saddharma Nikasaya* [Touchstone of Truth] by the Colombo Wesleyan Mission Press. Hardy's major criticism was concerning the reliability of the Buddhist canon. Highlighting the 450 years of gap between the Buddha's teachings and the writing of the canon, Hardy questioned the reliability of the Buddhist texts. The Christians used Hardy's criticism in their confrontations with the Buddhists.

seems that the other missionaries had not read Colenso or considered the necessity of providing appropriate answers to such criticism. Instead, they just defended the biblical records. Thus in the Baddegama controversy, Parsons simply stated that the tabernacle was indeed spacious enough to hold 603,550 adult males. In fact, such superficial defences of biblical inerrancy have continued to undermine Christianity in Sri Lanka even to the present day.

In addition to Colenso, the Buddhists endeavoured to “dazzle the Sinhalese Christians by evoking the names of the English Agnostics.”²¹ For instance the Buddhists based their arguments against the omniscience of Jehovah on Charles Bradlaugh’s (1833-1891) *The Bible: What It Is!*²² Gunananda had used Bradlaugh’s writings extensively in his speeches and writings, and even published Sinhalese translations of Bradlaugh’s tracts. He had also used American and British deists and secularists such as Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Richard Carlile (1790-1843) and George J. Holyoake (1817-1906) in his sermons and publications.²³ In the Baddegama controversy the monks disputed and denied the omniscience of Jehovah by using Bradlaugh’s writings. The Christians condemned such secularist publications without even reading them. But when faced with the arguments presented in such publications, they found it difficult, if not impossible, to give proper answers to them. Similar reactions to anti-Christian writings can be observed among Sri Lankan Christians today, giving non-Christians further reason to reject the claims of the Bible.

In the Baddegama controversy, the Buddhists defended the *chakkavala* cosmography.²⁴ Parsons criticised it by using the arguments of Gogerly. He further cited a passage from a

²¹ L.A. Wickremeratna, “Religion, Nationalism, and Social Change in Ceylon 1865-1885” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 (1969), p. 143.

²² London: Holyoke and Company, 1861.

²³ L.A. Wickremeratna, “Religion, Nationalism, and Social Change in Ceylon” pp. 138, 131.

²⁴ Cf. Chapter One, Footnote 236.

13th century hagiography of the Buddha to denigrate the Buddha. But the Buddhists pointed out that the hagiography quoted by the Christians was not a canonical text, and said that the discussions should be restricted to the realm of authorised texts. At this point, Parsons interrupted, and questioned the reliability of the Buddhist canon by highlighting the fallibility of the memories of the Buddhist Sages who wrote it. He substantiated his argument by referring to the furore caused amongst the Buddhists over the three entreaties of *Brahma Sahampati* in Gogerly's *Kristyani Prajnapti*. Due to Parsons's interruption and deviation from the prepared text, contrary to the mutually accepted rules for this debate, a dispute arose and the controversy ended abruptly. It was restarted in May by correspondence but no new arguments were introduced.²⁵

(B) CONSEQUENCES OF THE FIRST DEBATE

The immediate result of the Baddegama controversy was not in favour of the Christians, for church attendance and school enrolments dropped off soon after the debate.²⁶ People began to doubt the reliability of the biblical text, as the Buddhist monks once a week had public meetings to preach against Christianity using the Bible as their textbook. The Buddhist monks highlighted the passages that appeared to them difficult or inconsistent, and popularised the views of the western biblical critics. Therefore, Parsons himself finally realised that "controversy is a questionable mode of propagating truth."²⁷ However, the Buddhists were now eager to engage in further controversies, for they realised that by public debates with Christians they could prove that the harmful attacks of the missionaries on Buddhism were false. Hence, the monks of Balapitiya Modera invited Parsons to enter into a second public controversy. A similar invitation was sent to Senanayake of the CMS mission by the monks of Ambalangoda, but these invitations were set aside by the

²⁵ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 145.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 146.

²⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.* p. 146. Parsons died on the same year.

Christians as they were not prepared to enter into another controversy so quickly.²⁸ Parsons went to the extent of restricting the catechist under him from engaging in further controversies with the Buddhists without his special permission.²⁹ It should be noted here that after the first controversy, the initiative in seeking controversy had shifted from Christians to Buddhists. The latter had now become confident that public debates with Christians were an effective method of thwarting the missionary efforts to Christianise Sri Lanka.

After the Baddegama controversy, Mohottivatte Gunananda (1823-1890) emerged as the debating voice for the Buddhists seeking to bring lasting victory and glory to Buddhism and Sri Lanka.³⁰ He was "well versed in the Buddhist teaching and armed with information against the Christians,"³¹ for he had "assiduously studied the Christian scriptures and read with avidity such rationalistic literature as he could obtain dealing with the fallacies of Christianity."³² Born in Balapitiya, a Southern town, Gunananda resided as a monk at a temple in Kotahena in the vicinity of Colombo, and went to almost all the villages in the Southern, Western and Central Provinces of the country preaching against Christianity.³³ It is reported that he preached almost "four thousand sermons over twenty-five years of itineration."³⁴ In fact, he "stormed several Christian strongholds, always throwing down his challenge to them to meet him in open debate, where the relative merits of the two religions could be discussed face-to-face."³⁵

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 146.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 146.

³⁰ G.P.Malalasekera remarks: "the denunciation of Buddhism went on apace, till a young monk named Mohottivatte Gunananda, appeared on the scene and flung the gauntlet down in a challenge to the Christians to meet him on open debate" (*The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1973, p. 300).

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 301.

³² *Ibid.* p. 300.

³³ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials of the Wesleyan Mission – South Ceylon 1814-1864*. Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1864. p. 154.

³⁴ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 132.

³⁵ G.P.Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*, p. 300.

Gunananda began his anti-Christian propaganda at Kotahena temple in March 1862 and his activities became “the general subjects of conversation in the streets and market places.”³⁶ From August 1862 to December 1865, Gunananda published nine instalments of his *Durlabdhī Vinodaniya* (Heretical Amusement), in which Christianity was severely criticised.³⁷ He insisted that Jehovah was not God, but a bloodthirsty devil, as shown by the Old Testament sacrifices. He argued that gods received offerings of incense, flowers, garlands, and light while devils received fish, flesh, bones, fried meat, and burned meat and offerings of blood. Since the Old Testament is full of blood sacrifices, Gunananda concluded that Jehovah is not God, but only a devil.³⁸ Citing the Exodus narrative, Gunananda argued that Jehovah is devoid of justice, propriety, or goodness, and concluded that he was not God. According to him it was to kill more people that Jehovah had hardened the heart of the Pharaoh. Gunananda, utilising western biblical critical studies,³⁹ highlighted the biblical passages that are apparently paradoxical, pointing out that the Bible was filled with contradictory statements, and concluding that it was not the word of God. It was his contention that, “like jackals eating a nauseating[ly] smelly carcass of a cow, senseless people have accepted the false complication called the Bible.”⁴⁰ Gunananda, like other Buddhists, questioned the authenticity of the citations in Gogerly’s work concerning the three entreaties of Brahma Sahampati. Hence, “a serialised refutation of the *Prajñapti* appeared in Gunananda’s news paper *Satya Margaya* (The Way of Truth) from April to October 1869.”⁴¹

³⁶ D.Gogerly, *Missionary Letter*, 17 June 1862.

³⁷ The details of Gunananda’s publications are already mentioned in the first chapter. See pages 55-58.

³⁸ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 136. There were similar stories about Jehovah written by the Buddhists. R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna mention such a palm leaf manuscript, in which Jehovah is compared to the terrifying Alavaka, whose story is told in the commentary to the *Sutta Nipata*. This was a *yakkha* (demon) who could only be appeased by the sacrifice of human victims until he was converted by the Buddha (*Ibid.* p. 138).

³⁹ Cf. Chapter Two, pp. 63-64.

⁴⁰ Quoted in T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition 1852-1906*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London: University of London, 1973, p. 201.

⁴¹ R.S.Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials*, pp. 298-299.

(C) CONTINUATION OF THE PUBLIC DEBATES

In August 1865, Gunananda was invited by a regional *dharmasabha* at Varagoda (near Kelaniya) to engage in a public debate with Christians. In this second public debate Juan Silva, the Sinhalese pastor of that area spoke. The third public debate was held at the village of Udanvita in the vicinity of Colombo on 1 February 1866. On the Christian side the chief spokesperson was John Edward Hunupola, a former Buddhist monk who was serving at that time as a CMS catechist at Udanvita. Apart from the people who had gathered to see the debate, there were 39 monks and 2 lawyers who presided over the meeting. It was mutually agreed to confine the debate to three important subjects: God as Creator, Saviour and Judge, and Eternal Heaven. Both parties were to make a thirty-minute speech on each topic.⁴²

Hunupola, who spoke first, made an attempt to prove the existence of the Creator using Buddhist texts, but Gunananda pointed out that the Buddhist texts speak about the Buddha and not about any creator.⁴³ Hunupola then requested another ten minutes to defend the existence of the Creator by arguing that since life did not begin spontaneously, the existence of life proves that there is a life-giving Creator. Gunananda again refuted Hunupola's arguments, and questioned the activities of the Creator prior to the creation of the world.⁴⁴

When the subject matter of the debate changed to God as Saviour, Hunupola said that even the Buddha had given his bodily organs and children to gain salvation, and pointed out that Jesus suffered and died to redeem the humankind. Gunananda, however, argued that nobody was saved by the sufferings of Jesus, for the Christian Bible itself says that those whose deeds are good will inherit heaven, and evildoers will suffer in hell. Therefore, he

⁴² T.S.Dharmabandu, *Pancha Maha Vadaya*, pp. 129-132.

⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 133-136.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 136-137.

insisted that to say someone suffered to save others is foolish talk.⁴⁵ Concerning God as Judge, Hunupola said that for there to be an offender a judge is necessary, and for sinners Jesus is the judge. He argued that since there is no judge in Buddhism, it could not be a true religion. Gunananda countered Hunupola's arguments by saying that it was not the judge who make a person a criminal but the conduct of the latter that proved him to be an evildoer. The judge does not condemn a person, but the accused is proved guilty by the prosecution. The judge is there to bring in the verdict of punishment according to the person's evil deeds, and he is not the one to punish the guilty one.⁴⁶ It was decided to cancel the third topic, but Hunupola spoke about eternal heaven, and later published the whole controversy with some additional arguments. Gunananda published a rebuttal of the arguments of Hunupola.⁴⁷ This controversy is an excellent illustration to the fact that logical arguments in religious controversy tend to attract counter-arguments, and are unlikely to provide a profitable way of convincing the other side.

The next major controversy was held at Gampola in the central province for two days on the 9 and 10 June 1871. On the Buddhist side, Pandit Batuvantudave joined with Gunananda. F.S.Sirimanne and J.E.Hunupola, the speakers of the previous controversies, addressed the audience from the Christian side. Sirimanne's first speech dealt with standard controversial issues such as omniscience,⁴⁸ the *chakkavala*-cosmography, and the transmission of the Pali canon by the *rahats*.⁴⁹ He later introduced the story of Prince Vessantara, an episode of the Buddha's former life, from a Buddhist *Jataka*. Vessantara was known for his extreme generosity among the Sinhalese, but Sirimanne ridiculed the Buddha for giving away his wife and children to gain merit and condemned it as an

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 138-139.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 139-140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 141-151.

⁴⁸ He repeated the arguments of Gogerly (*Ibid.* p. 8).

⁴⁹ Cf. Footnote 20 for the Christian argument on this issue.

uncivilised act.⁵⁰ Gunananda, however, pointed out that what Prince Vessantara did was a supreme act of generosity and that by giving away his earthly possession the prince detached himself from selfish desires and attained his goal. Gunananda reminded the audience that no harm was done to the wife and children of Vessantara when he gave them away.⁵¹ Gunananda also found a similar episode in the Bible but he attributed it to the bloodthirstiness of Jehovah. He referred to the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, and said that nobody came to rescue of the daughter as the god Saka did when he intervened to protect the wife of the Prince. Christians, however, insisted that the daughter of Jephthah was not actually sacrificed, but remained a perpetual virgin. Gunananda also ridiculed the birth of Jesus by referring to an old myth, which depicts Jesus as an illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier.⁵²

After the Gampola controversy, Gunananda continued to "traverse the country with lightning speed, popping up here and there, while posses of missionaries and catechists were dispatched to track him down and force a confrontation."⁵³ David de Silva and Paul Rodrigo had a confrontation with Gunananda at Negomba in 1870.⁵⁴ In the following year, Richard Dowbeggin of the CMS station at Kotte tried to enter into a debate with Gunananda, but nothing came out of his efforts.⁵⁵ The following year, some efforts were made to organise another debate, but that too failed.⁵⁶ On 26 June 1871, about 300 Buddhist monks gathered at Kadugannawa in the Central Province to debate with the Christians. There was a similar debate held on the 28th of the same month. In these debates, the Baptist minister Juan de Silva spoke on behalf of the Christians.⁵⁷ In the mean time, after the Baddegama debate, most of the eminent monks were involved in revising the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* pp. 11-12.

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 12-56.

⁵³ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 151.

⁵⁴ J.Scott, *Quarterly Letters*, LXXII, 1870, p. 56.

⁵⁵ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 151.

⁵⁶ D.de Silva, *Quarterly Letters*, 1871, pp. 132-134.

⁵⁷ C.W.Karunaratna, *Buddhism and Christianity in Colonial Ceylon: The British Period, 1796-1948*. Ilford: George Barmukacha, 1999, p. 124.

Buddhist canon and were not able to enter into debates with the Christians. Such a revision was necessitated after the allegation of Gogerly regarding the three entreaties of Brahma Sahampati in his *Kristyani Prajnapti*.⁵⁸ Except Gunananda, other scholarly monks became involved in this work from 1868 to 1872.⁵⁹ Therefore, Gunananda became the leading figure in the ongoing Buddhist-Christian controversy. His preaching tours, and his paper *Sathiya Margaya* (The Way of Truth), kept the controversy alive until he became the heroic personality of Sri Lankan Buddhism during the decisive and historic controversy held at Panadura in August 1873.

2. THE CELEBRATED PANADURA DEBATE

Panadura, situated some twenty kilometres south of Colombo, has become popular in the religious history of Sri Lanka due mainly to the Buddhist-Christian controversy of 1873. The Methodist missionaries had established one of their earliest mission stations at this town in 1817, and, in the year of the controversy, David de Silva was appointed as the minister of the local Methodist chapel.⁶⁰ In fact, this appointment was the "immediate precipitating cause of the 1873 debate."⁶¹ Since de Silva had been trained by Gogerly as a Pali scholar, he was "entrusted with the onerous task of repairing the damage Gunananda had inflicted on the Christian communities scattered up and down the Southwest Littoral"⁶² prior to his appointment at Panadura. Hence, when he began his ministry in Panadura, the local Christians wanted to challenge the Buddhists under his leadership.⁶³ In the meantime, the Buddhists also wanted to get de Silva's explanations of the Buddhist doctrines that were referred to in the works of Gogerly.⁶⁴ Therefore two days were set-aside in August to

⁵⁸ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 152.

⁵⁹ T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities*, pp. 224-226, 233-234, 296-307.

⁶⁰ W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1971, pp. 55-56.

⁶¹ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, pp. 158-159.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 159.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 159.

⁶⁴ J.Scott, *Quarterly Letters*, LXXII, 1873, pp. 195-196.

hold a public debate. At this time both parties were eager to have public debates in order to vindicate the truth of their religion. Hence this became the decisive debate in the nineteenth-century Buddhist-Christian controversies.

It has been reported that more than four thousand people came to Panadura to see and hear this historic debate on 26 August 1873. On the second day (28 August 1873), the crowd had declined to two thousand. Journalists were also present at the site to reproduce the debate in print. From the Christian side, David de Silva and F.S.Sirimanne met their Buddhist opponents in public confrontation. Beside Gunananda, the scholarly monks of that time such as Bulatgama Sumanatissa, Hikkaduve Sumangala and Valigama Sri Sumangala, were also present at the site of this debate. In this significant debate, each side was given a total of four hours for constructive speeches and rebuttals, one each in the morning and afternoon of the two days. The proceedings commenced each day at 8 a.m. and closed at 10 a.m. They were again resumed at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and terminated at 5 p.m.⁶⁵ In these two days of debate, several issues relating to both religions were raised as the subjects of the debate. Many of them were, of course, the usual matters of controversy of that era that have already been dealt with in this chapter. Moreover, there was much repetition as each party spoke one after the other defending their religious tenets and counter-arguing their opponent's discourse. The major subjects that were discussed in the Panadura debate are analysed in the rest of this chapter.

(A) EXPOUNDING RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Following in the footsteps of Gogerly, de Silva tended to criticise Buddhist doctrines by citing Pali texts. The Christian side expounded the Buddhist texts only in order to criticise them, and to condemn the religious stories, concepts and precepts of Buddhism. Hence, their interpretations of Buddhist doctrines were inevitably controversial and often even

⁶⁵ P.Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, p. 35.

false, for they expounded the Buddhist texts from a Christian point of view, and distorted the profound concepts and beliefs of Buddhism. The Buddhists repeatedly countered by pointing out that only enlightened people could understand the Buddhist doctrines fully, and remarked that de Silva's attempt to explain them was like "the barking of a dog envious at the splendour of the moon," or "the babbling of a madman" and "the roaming of a blind elephant in a thick jungle."⁶⁶ Further, de Silva's speech was so full of Pali citations that it became incomprehensible to the audience, and thus failed to convince the Buddhists.

On the very first day of the debate, de Silva made an attempt to point out contradictions in Buddhist concepts by citing Pali texts. Since there is nothing called 'soul' in a person, and death brings total extinction to the five *skandhas*⁶⁷ that constitute a human being according to Buddhism, then de Silva contended, the new being produced from it would be a different being, and would not be the identical person who committed good or bad who receives the reward or suffers punishment, but another person.⁶⁸ De Silva had tried logically to confute the fundamentals of Buddhism but failed to realise that such arguments could also be used against Christianity. Replying to de Silva's arguments, Gunananda used similar logic to undermine the Christian Bible. He pointed out that the Bible in current use was not the original, nor was it the one used by the early Christians, yet nobody said, "it was a different Bible. The substance in both was the same, though it was not the identical book; so it was with the *Atma*."⁶⁹ In fact such logical refutations of the Buddhists had a greater appeal to the audience than de Silva's technical form of criticism of Buddhism based on the Pali texts. Therefore, on the second day, Christians were compelled to introduce Sirimanne as their principal speaker in the debates.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 115, 117, 119.

⁶⁷ According to Buddhism, a being is a composite of five *skandhas* (aggregates). They are recorded in the *Samyutta-nikaya* as *rupa* (matter or form), *vedana* (sensation), *sanna* (perception), *sankhara* (mental formations) and *vinnana* (consciousness).

⁶⁸ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, pp. 40-54.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 59.

It may seem that de Silva was correct in his criticism, but he had not fully understood Buddhist teaching on these issues. Hence Gunananda, while criticising de Silva's knowledge of Pali, pointed out, "though at one's death all those constituents which make up the outward physical man perish, and no portion of them is transferred to another world, yet the conscious being, though produced in consequence, is not a different one."⁷⁰ Since such concepts are not easy to comprehend, on the second day, from the Christian side, Sirimanne remarked that Gunananda, while criticising de Silva's exposition of the Buddha's denial of the human soul, had confirmed such an entity contrary to his arguments.⁷¹ For Gunananda had said, "though the being [in the rebirth] was not the same, it was not a different one,"⁷² and on the second day he once again insisted that the being who suffered hereafter was not a different one, and each continued in his or her individuality.⁷³ In fact, such Buddhist teachings and other doctrines that were criticised by Christians are profound concepts similar to the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity, which are extremely difficult to comprehend and explain. Whilst Christians had accused the Buddhists of holding self-contradictory doctrines, Buddhists maintained with some justice that such accusations were based on incomprehension.⁷⁴

In a similar way the Buddhists distorted biblical concepts due to their subjective interpretative methodologies. For instance, Gunananda remarked that like Buddhism the Christian Bible also teaches the immortality of human beings. According to him, "the spirit

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 55-59.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* pp. 86-88.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 55.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 119.

⁷⁴ According to Buddhism, the *skandhas* that make up a living being disintegrate at death. Hence there is nothing in a person that continues to exist after death although all forms of Buddhism accept the continuity of life. In fact, what the Buddha denied is not the continuance of life but his contemporaries' belief in a permanent, unchanging, and eternal entity called *atman*. Buddhism denies the transmigration of souls but declares that the *skandhas* that constitute a being pass from one existence to another. According to Theravada Buddhism, the person who is reborn is neither the same nor is he another yet he is also similar. Theravada Buddhism believes that there are three factors – female ovum, the male sperm and the karmic energy – involved in the rebirth of a human being. The karmic energy is sent forth by a dying individual at the moment of his/her death. Yet no transmigration of soul takes place. Though Buddhism believes in rebirth and in the continuity of life, it does not contradict its position in the doctrine of *anatta*. For the concept of *anatta* denies the permanent and immutable nature of an entity called self or soul. It does not deny the continuity of life but points out its constant change and mutable character.

breathed into Adam was a portion of the Spirit of God, who was eternal, thus Adam or Adamic form, was made the receptacle of spirit, and was made eternal; and if Adam were the father of the human race, as is alleged, then all men are eternal, and this was precisely the Buddhist doctrine.⁷⁵ But Sirimanne pointed out that such explanations were “ridiculous absurdities” and said, “the passage referred to only meant that God gave life to man and deposited the soul in him. There was nothing at all there to show that God parted with a portion of his own soul.”⁷⁶ But Gunananda again insisted that Jehovah did breathe a portion of his own soul into Adam.⁷⁷ Similarly, citing Ecclesiastes 3:19, Gunananda remarked that the Christian Bible likened man unto a beast.⁷⁸ While explaining the phrase in Genesis “the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,” Gunananda stated, “the acting of this spirit on the water was the cause of all animal and vegetable life,”⁷⁹ for “the action of air on water always produced animal life... The origin of all species was then, even according to the Bible, breath or air.”⁸⁰ Similarly, referring to the account of the Human Fall depicted in Genesis, Gunananda said, ‘Satan’ is ‘lust,’ and ‘eating the forbidden fruit’ signified “carnal knowledge which produced child-birth and all the other baneful consequences mentioned in the Bible.”⁸¹ He went to the extent of asking, “if sorrow in childbearing was the punishment for actually eating the fruit, how could they account for the agony that many members of the brute creation suffer when giving birth to their young... Had they also eaten of the forbidden fruit? Such was Christianity! It was full of irrational and unreasonable notions.”⁸²

⁷⁵ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, p. 89. According to Buddhism, the only means of terminating this continual round of existence is by entering *nibbana*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 100.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 124.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 113-114. De Silva on the other hand pointed out that in verse 3:19 “animal life and the mortality of the body are only meant; but the latter showed [i.e. verse 3:17] that there was a spirit besides, which went to God who gave it.”

⁷⁹ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, p. 163.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 163. Gunananda illustrated his point as: “If a coconut, which usually remains on the tree without rotting for nine or ten months, be pierced through and air be allowed to enter into it, the water inside was sure to breed worms; and as long as air could be excluded from water, there was no generation of any insect. Likewise in this instance, ‘the spirit of God’ as it was called, acted upon the face of the waters, and it produced animal life (*Ibid.* p. 163).

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 164.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 164.

Such Buddhist interpretations, together with the Christian exposition of Buddhist doctrines, indicate that neither party accepted the other's textual interpretation of their own religion as valid and sound. In fact, one of the weakest points of the Buddhist-Christian controversy was such distortions of religious texts by subjective interpretations. Both parties ventured to criticise and ridicule their opponents' religious texts. For instance, Sirimanne mocked the sacrifices made by the Buddha to attain *nibbana* by explaining the story of Vessantara as he did in the Gampola debate. He further stated that taking refuge in the Buddha, in the *Dhamma*, and in the *Sangha*, as the Buddhists were accustomed to do was of no use because the Buddha is annihilated and cannot become any refuge. *Bana* Books were under the care and protection of men and kept safely in an *ulmirah*, or chest, to prevent their being destroyed. Thus the second refuge was of no avail. As regards the third refuge – the refuge in *Sangha* – Sirimanne pointed out the immorality of the monks.⁸³ But as Gunananda's explanation shows, Sirimanne criticised the Buddhist doctrines without considering their implication due to his Christian mindset.⁸⁴

The major weakness of the controversy was the derogatory criticism that both religious groups levelled against one another's religion and their unwillingness to interpret the religious texts objectively i.e. they did not expound the texts in their own socio-cultural-religious and linguistic contexts. Instead they viewed the texts only from their own contexts and distorted their original intended meaning. Dismissing the Buddhist doctrine of 'Dependent Origination'⁸⁵ as full of "absurdities and contradictions,"⁸⁶ de Silva concluded that "what every man was expected to know, Buddha only knew after he had attained to Buddhahood."⁸⁷ He further stated that by giving minor punishments for some of the major

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 112.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 158-159.

⁸⁵ The doctrine of 'dependent origination' (*Paticcasamuppada*) teaches the conditionality, and the dependent nature of all physical and psychological phenomena of existence.

⁸⁶ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, pp. 75-79.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 134.

crimes, the Buddha had encouraged such vices.⁸⁸ Referring to the death of the Buddha, de Silva said that what happened to the Buddha would “prove that the statements recorded about Buddha’s super-human power were as fabulous as those related to lull children.”⁸⁹ De Silva also criticised the saints in whom the Buddhists take refuge as robbers and murderers.⁹⁰ Citing various Buddhist *Jatakas* to highlight the character of the Buddha in previous lives de Silva concluded that the life of the Buddha was treacherous and immoral.⁹¹

Gunananda, however, denied the accusations made against the Buddhist saints, stating they were “totally untrue,” and pointing out that “it never appeared in any Buddhist works that even an ant had been killed by [them] much less a man.”⁹² He went to the extent of denying the sacrifices made by the Buddha in his previous lives to attain *nibbana* stating that such passages “never appear amongst Buddha’s sayings.”⁹³ Further, stating that de Silva’s explanation of ‘Dependant Origination’ was arrant nonsense, and his illustration of father begetting the son and son begetting the father was not true of Buddhism, Gunananda remarked that only Christianity held such doctrines.⁹⁴ Gunananda, criticising the characters of the Bible, asked, “how will the Rev. gentleman get over the numerable immoralities mentioned in the Bible for instance, that affair of Lot and his daughter, the incest committed by the sons and daughters of Eve, and a host of others?”⁹⁵ Gunananda accused Moses of murder, and said, “my opponent talked something about ‘filth’ in Buddhist

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 144-145.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 145-146.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 136.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 138-139.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 150.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 152.

⁹⁴ Gunananda stated, “As Mary, the Mother of Christ, was created by Jehovah, Jehovah was her father, and Mary his daughter; but because the Holy Ghost was conceived in Mary’s womb Jehovah becomes her son, and Mary, Jehovah’s mother and as Christ is Jehovah’s son Jehovah becomes Mary’s husband, and Mary his wife. So according to the scriptures the same Mary becomes in one case Jehovah’s daughter, in another Jehovah’s mother, again Jehovah’s wife, and truly if the term ‘roundabout’ or ‘circumlocutory genesis’ could be applied to any proceeding, it was to the Trinity notion connected with the birth of Christ, and not to the reasonable doctrine of *patiecasamuppada*... It was in Christianity and not in Buddhism that a father is said to be born of a son and a son of a father” (*Ibid.* p. 149).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 157.

books. The charge is false and untrue. But if there were more filthy things in print than might be found in some parts of the Christian's Bible, he had not seen them."⁹⁶ In fact, all these criticisms were little more than an exchange of religious insults.

Gunananda also accused the Christians of deceiving the Buddhists by not correctly translating the Sinhalese Bible. He highlighted the Sinhalese rendering of the term 'jealous' in the Sinhalese Bible as '*jwalita*.' Since *jwalita* means glittering, or luminous, Gunananda insisted that the proper synonym for it would have been 'envious.'⁹⁷ It was Gunananda's contention that Christians habitually practise deceit in order to gain converts, and the Sinhalese rendering of jealousy as *jwalita* was an example of such deceptive methods of evangelism.⁹⁸ He also pointed out the omission of Leviticus 17:6 in the Sinhala Bible. Although this verse appeared in the 1840 edition, it was omitted in the later version. According to Gunananda, it was "gross deception."⁹⁹ He stated, "possibly the Christians were ashamed that it should be known that they had offered sacrifices to devils, and had omitted this passage from the second edition."¹⁰⁰

De Silva, pointed out that there were no omissions made in the later version of the Sinhalese Bible as Gunananda insisted, but the particular verse was renumbered as 17:7 in order to conform more precisely to the English Bible.¹⁰¹ Since de Silva did not say anything about the Sinhalese rendering of the term jealousy, Gunananda said that Christians were thus deceiving the people of this country, and once again insisted that 'envy' was the correct equivalent of the original word used in the Bible,¹⁰² and accused the Christians of altering the Bible whenever they pleased.¹⁰³ In fact, in Asian contexts, the

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 151.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 64.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 64.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 64.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 65.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 72.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 81.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* pp. 81-82.

variety of Bible translations and constant revisions and publishing of new versions often create such doubts in the minds of non-Christians, and Gunananda was no exception to this. It is likely that Gunananda's attempt to find faults in the biblical text was an imitation of Gogerly's criticism concerning the three entreaties of *Brahma Sahampati*, and Western biblical critics had provided sufficient material to condemn the Bible.

(B) EVIL DISPOSITIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN GOD

As in the previous controversies and Buddhist polemical literature, the nature of Jehovah became an important subject in the Panadura debate. Gunananda repeatedly argued that Jehovah was not an all-knowing God, but a cruel devil. He had used his knowledge of Western biblical criticism to argue that Jehovah was not omniscient, and Eastern customs to depict Jehovah as a bloodthirsty devil. Gunananda was not convinced by the counter-arguments of the Christians; and he repeated them in his speeches. He referred to Genesis 6:6 where God repented,¹⁰⁴ and to Exodus 12:23 where Jehovah was unable to distinguish the houses of the Israelites without an outward and visible sign,¹⁰⁵ and to the series of miracles God performed when he brought the Israelites out of Egypt, all to substantiate his argument that Jehovah was not omniscient.¹⁰⁶ In order to depict Jehovah as 'a bloodthirsty devil,' in addition to the Old Testament sacrifices, Gunananda referred to the act of Zipporah when God sought to kill Moses (Exodus 4:24), saying that it was similar to that of the devil dancers of Sri Lanka who appease the wrath of the devils by offering blood sacrifices.¹⁰⁷ Citing Judges 1:19, he remarked that since it is only devils who are scared of iron objects, Jehovah, who was afraid of iron chariots, was nothing else than a devil.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 65-66.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 66.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 67. Since God performed the miracles one after the other on the basis that if people did not listen and obey after one miracle that another would be performed, Gunananda argued that this demonstrated that God was not omniscient for he did not know the response of the people until the miracle was performed.

¹⁰⁷ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ Gunananda pointed out, "It was usual amongst the natives of this country to have a small piece of iron when food was carried from one place to another, and when decoctions were prepared it was customary to tie a string with a piece of iron hanging from it round the pot in which is the medicine. This was done to keep

The Christian response failed to identify the fundamental misconception underlying these criticisms of the Buddhists. For instance, de Silva simply stated that the original Hebrew word in Genesis 6:6 did not mean that God 'regretted' doing anything wrong, while reading an article he had already read in a previous controversy.¹⁰⁹ Since Gunananda had already criticised that article, he remarked that there was no use in repeating "those hackneyed arguments"¹¹⁰ Since de Silva had simply stated that the blood applied to the doorposts in Exodus was a symbol of Christ's death,¹¹¹ Gunananda exclaimed "what a silly reply was this to his argument," and insisted again that it was "because the Christian's God required an outward and visible sign to distinguish objects, [and] he did not possess the power of knowing everything."¹¹² Gunananda also pointed out his unanswered criticisms concerning the series of miracles in response to people's behaviour prior to the exodus, and again insisted that it was due to God being not omniscient. He further remarked that God's injunction to circumcise Moses' son would, "betray his fondness for human blood in common with evil spirits having similar tastes."¹¹³ He also cited the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter to substantiate this criticism.¹¹⁴

On the second day, in response to Gunananda's accusations, Sirimanne said that God was aware of Pharaoh's intention from the beginning, and the various plagues were intended to show God's power to the Egyptians.¹¹⁵ He also pointed out that Zipporah did not cast the foreskin of her son at God's feet as Gunananda alleged, but at Moses'.¹¹⁶ He further stated that "it was not because the Lord feared iron chariots that Judah did not meet with success... but simply because he lacked faith in God."¹¹⁷ Sirimanne insisted that

away devils and sundry evil spirits; and that was the meaning of the God of the Hebrews fearing iron chariots (*Ibid.* p. 69).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p. 75.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 83.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 75.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 83.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 84.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 91.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 98.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 98.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 99.

Jephthah's daughter was not killed but continued to live as a virgin,¹¹⁸ and went on to remark, that even if she had been sacrificed, God cannot be blamed because "he was no party to Jephthah's rash vow."¹¹⁹ However, Gunananda was not satisfied with these explanations and again challenged the Christians on these lines by repeating the same arguments.¹²⁰

In the Panadura debate, Jesus Christ was also depicted as an evil person by the argument that his life had inflicted misery on humanity, starting with the slaughter of the innocent infants of Bethlehem. According to Gunananda, "the massacre of thousands of little innocents indicate that Christ was a pretender who came to the world with the view of casting men into perdition... no salvation in a future state could reasonably be expected by believing in such a being."¹²¹ He insisted that 'omens' associated with his birth were inauspicious in contrast with the Buddha whose very conception had thirty-two good and cheerful omens and wonders.¹²² In responding to this criticism Sirimanne instead of arguing on the basis of Christian principles, accepted the non-Christian concept of omens. Hence he said, that the ill omen "indicated that something the reverse of good would result by his birth... by this massacre no injury resulted to the infants, because... their souls went to heaven, it only expedited their enjoyment of eternal bliss; and as for the parents... it may have been the means of bringing them to repentance, and thereby to everlasting happiness."¹²³ Sirimanne went to the extent of arguing that it was only with the birth of the Buddha that several ill omens were associated, such as, the death of the mother of the Buddha after seven days of his birth,¹²⁴ and the death of several men and beasts due to the

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 101.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 100. He further pointed out that "human sacrifices were explicitly prohibited in the Holy Scriptures; and provision was made in the Jewish code to meet the case of a person making such a rash vow, which was to pay a sum of money as a ransom, and thus save the life of the fellow being" (*Ibid.* p. 101).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 122-125.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 92-93.

¹²² *Ibid.* pp. 92-93.

¹²³ *Ibid.* pp. 102-103.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 103-104.

roaring of lions during the time of the Buddha's birth.¹²⁵ However, Gunananda pointed out that the death of Buddha's mother was not in consequence of Buddha's birth but it was pre-ordained.¹²⁶ Gunananda also accused Sirimanne of falsely interpreting the voice of the Buddha at his birth as a roaring lion, which was "silly and stupid."¹²⁷

As pointed out earlier, the accusations that the Christian God was not omniscient and bloodthirsty, and similar denunciations of Christ, were the inevitable reaction to the Christian criticism of Buddhism.¹²⁸ Even on the second day, Sirimanne repeated the old argument concerning the omniscience of the Buddha based on the *Mahawagga*.¹²⁹ De Silva also continued to castigate the Buddha as not being omniscient, and in his final address he did this by highlighting some of the misconduct of the monks, and the inability of the Buddha to foresee these crimes and give commandments against such vices.¹³⁰ Gunananda, however, in his final address, defended the omniscience of Buddha by saying that "Buddha's omniscience was, however, far different; he only discovered and saw what he wanted to by directing his power to it... and for the Christian party to say that he did not possess this power is simply because he did not exercise it."¹³¹ The missionaries, instead of preaching Christ, had denigrated Buddhism, and thus signally failed to communicate the message of Christ to the Buddhists.

(C) EMPLOYING WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

As pointed out earlier, the Buddhists utilised western biblical scholarship to undermine Christianity in their confrontations with missionaries.¹³² Hence, in the Panadura debate, Gunananda stated that Jesus' prediction about his burial and resurrection recorded in

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 104-105.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 126.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 128.

¹²⁸ Cf. Chapter Two, page 63.

¹²⁹ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, pp. 110-111.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 143.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* pp. 160-161.

¹³² Cf. Chapter Two, pages 63-64.

Matthew 12:40 was false as Jesus was not in the grave for three days and three nights.¹³³ Like western biblical critics, he also denied Christ's resurrection by insisting that the disciples had taken Jesus' body out of the tomb and proclaimed that he was raised from the dead.¹³⁴ Another Western method of undermining the biblical narratives is to highlight the apparently contradictory passages, and, in his second day speech, Gunananda said that "1Corinthians 14:22-28 was contradicted by Matthew 25:41-46,"¹³⁵ and concluded that "a religion based upon such a book of contradictions was false."¹³⁶ Gunananda also denied the resurrection of Jesus, and remarked that the reason for his death was his rebellion against Roman Empire.¹³⁷

Similarly Christians, in a manner similar to contemporary evangelical assumptions, defended the inerrancy of the Bible without considering the issue seriously. Hence de Silva harmonised the contradiction pointed out by Gunananda between 1 Corinthians 14:22 and Matthew 25:41-47. Concerning Gunananda's accusation about Moses being a murderer, de Silva said, "Moses certainly did save the life of an innocent Hebrew by killing an Egyptian who was going to kill the Hebrew. Moses' act was perfectly justifiable and laudable. Even if it were otherwise, if he were a culprit, he was so before he was called of God. There was nothing to prevent him from obeying God, repenting, and being reformed."¹³⁸ Likewise, Sirimanne drew the attention of the people to the Jewish way of describing the day, and concluded that since a portion of a day was also called a day by them, three days and three nights were used to refer to three days.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, Gunananda was not satisfied with this explanation, for he asked, "Christ having risen on Saturday night, or according to the interpretation, before Sunday commenced, he only remained two days in the grave, the

¹³³ P. Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, p. 91.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 93, 162.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 120-121.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 120-121.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 161-162.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 136.

¹³⁹ Sirimanne cited Genesis 6:12 and 6:17 to substantiate such a usage. Forty days and forty nights in 7:12 is stated in 6:17 as forty days (*Ibid.* p. 102).

Friday and the Saturday, and how can that be made to signify three days and three nights?¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the Buddhists also, following the Christian methodology defended their religious texts. Concerning the criticism put forward by de Silva regarding the death of the Buddha, Gunananda said: “the pork and the rice did not cause Buddha’s death... but the incident was variously recorded to show the nature of food partaken of by Buddha before his death. He would have died at the appointed day even if he had not tasted it.”¹⁴¹ The Buddhists as well as Christians defended their religious texts without admitting the apparent difficulties those texts posed to the ordinary reader.

Utilising western apologetic methodology, Sirimanne questioned the authenticity of the Buddhist scriptures by highlighting the fact that they were written only 450 years after the death of the Buddha, and substantiated this by the accounts of *Mahavamsa* and *Sarasangraha*.¹⁴² Since the message of the Buddha was transmitted orally for such a long period, and no historical evidence was been shown but only explanations such as ‘some four or five hundred years ago there lived a sage in a distant land... and he is said to have expounded such and such doctrines’ were given, Sirimanne asserted that the Buddhists scriptures were not reliable and authentic.¹⁴³ However, Gunananda contended that what Sirimanne said was not true, and remarked that they were written for the first time 53 years after the Buddha’s death, during the reign of Walagambahu, in Sri Lanka; and that even during Buddha’s lifetime his sermons were engraved on gold leaves and asserted that those who wrote the Buddhist scriptures were holy and sinless sages who were able to keep in mind the entire teaching of the Buddha for any length of time, and not like the authors of the biblical books among whom were Moses the murderer.¹⁴⁴ In his final address, de Silva repeated that the Buddhist scriptures were written for the first time 450 years after the

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 132.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* pp. 157-158. Gunananda further remarked: “after all, what was there so very unclean in pork? Was it not better than the locusts made mention of in the Bible that were eaten by John the Baptist?” (*Ibid.* p. 158).

¹⁴² *Sarasangraha* was a thirteenth or fourteenth century work.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 106-107.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 129-130.

death of the Buddha.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Gunanānda continued to defend the authenticity of the Buddhist scriptures by repeating what he had said in his previous speech, and criticised the Bible.¹⁴⁶

Buddhists, as well as Christians, used western scientific knowledge of that time whenever it was possible to undermine their opponents' religion. From the Christian side, de Silva, using the scientific knowledge that the circumference of the earth is 25,000 miles, questioned the existence of Mount Meru, which, according to Buddhist cosmology, is 36,103,500 miles in circumference.¹⁴⁷ De Silva challenged, "therefore, a mountain with such dimensions could not exist on this earth... men at no period ever saw such a mountain... Mahameru... must be placed on the earth; if not, Buddhism must be rejected at once."¹⁴⁸ Gunananda, however, defended the existence of the mountain by showing from *Suryodgamana Sutra* that Buddha had declared the existence of it, and said that de Silva denied this "on the basis of Isaac Newton's discovery, which was proven not to be correct."¹⁴⁹ In order to disprove Newton's theory, Gunananda produced and handed around R. J. Morrison's book *New Principia* in which Newton's arguments were refuted.¹⁵⁰ Hence, he remarked "how unjust, then, to attempt to demolish the great Buddha's sayings by quoting as authority an immature system of astronomy, the correctness of which is not

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 135.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 150. According to the historical information available, the Buddhist texts were committed to writing for the first time in the first century BC at Aluvihara near Matale in the Central Province. Up to that time the Buddhist canon was preserved orally, which was brought orally from India (K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 57). There is a tradition that the three Pitakas were recorded on sheets of gold and were deposited in a rock at the Aluvihara (E.W.Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Dehiwela: The Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1994, p. 79). Gunananda may perhaps depended upon this tradition and this was the prevalent view of the Buddhists at that time. Christians were relied on R.S.Hardy's criticism on this issue (Cf. Chapter Two, Footnote 20).

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter One Footnote 236.

¹⁴⁸ P.Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, pp. 140-143.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 153.

¹⁵⁰ R.J.Morrison (1795-1874), who had published a popular astrological almanac since 1831 under the pseudonym "Zadkiel", brought out his refutation of the principles of Newtonian astronomy in 1868 under the title *The New Principia; Or, True System of Astronomy, in which the Earth is Proved to be the Stationary Centre of the Solar System; and the Sun is Shewn to be Only 365,006 Miles from the Earth, and the Moon Only 32,828.5 Miles Distant; While the Sun Travels Yearly in an Ellipse around the Earth, the Other Planets Moving about the Sun in Ellipse Also*. London: J.C.Berger.

yet accepted.”¹⁵¹ Gunananda, then quoting Ecclesiastes 1:5, said, that de Silva’s attempt to deny the existence of Mount Meru with the aid of this little globe and Newton’s theory, had only given the lie to his new religion, for it speaks about the movements of the sun instead of the rotation of the earth.¹⁵² Gunananda said that the mariner’s compass was the best proof that he could give them for the existence of Mount Meru. Since the attraction of the magnetic needle is always towards the North, he argued that Mount Meru is situated in that direction. He also challenged the Christians to explain why the needle always points towards the north rather than any other direction.¹⁵³ Gunananda’s reasoning clearly shows that he did not accept Newton’s discoveries as scientific truths, and his argument on this matter sounds unscientific. This episode reveals that the Buddhists, as well as the Christians, were very selective in accepting scientific discoveries and did so only when they were able to utilise them in defending their religious concepts.¹⁵⁴

The Buddhist-Christian controversies of late nineteenth-century Sri Lanka were centred on certain key aspects of each religion. Each party criticised their opponents’ religion and defended their own. There were many repetitions, and both parties were mainly concerned to discredit their opponents’ religion in all possible ways. Hence, their arguments were not very profound, and did not do justice to the other’s religious beliefs, and both parties misquoted and misinterpreted their opponent’s religious texts. Nevertheless, the Buddhists claimed that they had won the debates, and declared that their religion was superior to and more authentic than Christianity. More than the contents of the controversies, it was the oratorical skill of the debaters, especially of Gunananda, which brought victory to the Buddhists. Further, Gunananda’s oratorical style was also a contributory factor to his

¹⁵¹ P.Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*, p. 154.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 154

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* pp. 154-155.

¹⁵⁴ P.Abhayasundara, whose edition of the Panadura debate is used in this dissertation, has a note to say that for the Christians to introduce this topic of Mount Meru in the controversy was “ill-timed and out of place in a discussion relating to Buddhism; and for the reason that it is Hinduism, rather than Buddhism, that has to do with Meru” (*Ibid.* p. 142). However, it seems that Gunananda had already accepted this as a part of Buddhist cosmography for he had defended it by citing a statement of the Buddha referring to the existence of it (*Ibid.* p. 153).

victory. "In contrast to his seated and motionless traditional counterpart, he stood up when he spoke, and he also made free and skilful use of gestures"¹⁵⁵ by which he was able to hold the attention of the audience and convince them.¹⁵⁶ Although de Silva was a fluent speaker, his training under Gogerly, which made him to quote extensively from Pali texts, made his speech incomprehensible to the audience. His methodology of substantiating evidences for the stated arguments was particularly derived from the eighteenth-century enlightenment legacy with its western apologetics, which was not well calculated to convince the Buddhists. However, the Buddhists with their knowledge of the works of the western biblical critics and agnostics, and their oratorical skills were able to overthrow the arguments of the Christians without much difficulty. "Gunananda's defence present[ed] Buddhism as positive and counter[ed] the charge of irrationality."¹⁵⁷ Thus the controversies became counterproductive to the Christian missionaries, for the debates did not meet their long cherished expectations of mass conversion from Buddhism. Instead the Buddhists began to undermine Christianity and revive and reform their own religion, thus saving it from decline. This ultimately created formidable obstacles and challenges to the Christian mission in Sri Lanka and even brought a rupture in Buddhist-Christian relationship in the island. The rest of this dissertation proceeds to show the immediate and continuing impact of the controversies.

¹⁵⁵ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 226.

¹⁵⁶ Gunananda had imitated the preaching style of the Christian missionaries (*Ibid.* p. 226) and defeated them.

¹⁵⁷ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion: The British Encounter with Buddhism in Nineteenth Century Sri-Lanka*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Kelaniya: Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993, p. 612.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CONTROVERSIES

The nineteenth-century Sri Lanka not only saw the Buddhist-Christian controversies, but it also witnessed an immense resurgence in Buddhism, which was influenced, to a great extent, by the controversies. Contrary to the long cherished expectations of the Christians, Buddhism in Sri Lanka not only survived the fierce attacks of the missionaries, but also flourished. In fact, the controversies became counterproductive to the missionary enterprise. The nineteenth-century resurgence is a unique and extremely important event in the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka because Sri Lankan Buddhism regained much of what it had lost on account of the invasion of the country by Western colonial powers. This chapter will examine how the nineteenth-century Buddhist resurgence was influenced by the Buddhist-Christian controversies, and evaluate the changes that Buddhism itself underwent during this process of revival.

Although the Buddhist-Christian controversies were, to a great extent, responsible for the resurgence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, some argue that the resurgence would have taken place even without the controversies. They remark that “without the revival the controversy could not have occurred with sustained intensity, but the revival – tragically – could have occurred without the controversy.”¹ It is true that “revivalism began as a phenomenon precipitated by the institutional reform of the *sangha*... in the eighteenth century”² and the century following the restoration of higher ordination in 1753 had seen a

¹ R.F.Young, “Imagined Beleaguerment and the Self-Representation of Mohottivatte Gunananda” in *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited*. M.Roberts, ed., Colombo: Marga Institute, 1997, p. 177.

² Ibid. p. 174.

widespread spiritual re-awakening among the Buddhists,³ but this was mainly confined to the monks. It was Christian missionary activities, especially the controversies, which brought new vitality and vigour to a Buddhism that was struggling to survive under the colonial powers.⁴ The controversies “marked an advanced stage of the Buddhist revival,”⁵ for they “betokened the flowering of the Buddhist revival that had been growing in the monasteries for over a century.”⁶ Though the re-introduction of higher ordination from Thailand in 1753 marked a notable revival in the Buddhist *Sanga*, the controversies sparked the emergence and flourishing of a rather new kind of Buddhism in Sri Lanka which continues to influence the Buddhists even today. Therefore, “the Buddhist revival is perhaps better described as the Buddhist reaction to the missionary onslaught... [and the] Buddhist opinion was galvanised by...[the] public debates.”⁷

It could be argued that without the impetus of the controversies, the Buddhist revival would have been confined to the monasteries and Buddhism might have been weakened and eventually marginalised if the Buddhists had not been drawn into the controversies. Prior to the controversies, “throughout the country the idea had been spread that Buddhism

³ A.W.P.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of Anagarika Dharmapala*. Colombo: Ministry of Education & Cultural Affairs, 1965, p. xxx. An important event during this period of monastic reform was the founding in 1845 of the Paramadhammacetiya Pirivena in Ratmalana, south of Colombo. Pupils from this Buddhist institution of higher education established Vidyodaya Pirivena at Maligakanda in 1873 and Vidyalankara Pirivena at Paliyagoda in 1875 (K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 188).

⁴ Some argue that the jubilee celebrations of the missionaries in the eighteen-sixties only gave impetus to the Buddhist revival (Cf. G.C.Mendis, *Ceylon Under the British*. Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries Company, 1948, p. 107). And others see the rise of the Sinhala middle class the main cause for the Buddhist revival (Cf. S.G.Perera, *A History of Ceylon Vol.II*. Colombo: K.V.G.de Silva & Sons, 1955, p. 195). Yet others see evidence for the Buddhist revival in the establishment and the activities of the Buddhists printing press, especially in their response to Daniel Gogerly's *Kristyani Prajnapti* (Cf. T.Kariyawasam, *Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition 1852-1906*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, London: University of London, 1973, p. 188). Some see the Buddhist revival only in the arrival and activities of the theosophists during the post-controversy period (Cf. J.W.Balding, *The centenary Volume of the Church Missionary Society in Ceylon 1818-1918*. Madras: CMS Press, 1922, p. 21). Generally the Buddhists see a continuous development from the restoration of higher ordination in 1753 highlighted in particular by the founding in 1845 of the Paramadhammacetiya Pirivena where several scholars were educated who eventually became leaders of the revival movement (Cf. A.W.P.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. xxx). Nevertheless it was the controversies that brought the full potential of the Buddhists to bear on the revival.

⁵ A.W.P.Guruge, *Anagarika Dharmapala*. Colombo: Department of Cultural Affairs, 1967, p. 12

⁶ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992, p. 47

⁷ C.R.de Silva, *Sri-Lanka: A History*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1977, p. 198.

was a lower religion unworthy of acceptance”⁸ due to the missionary activities. The controversies, however, gave confidence and courage to Buddhists to recover their religion from oblivion and bring about a great revival.

In Ceylon at the moment when the unification of the administration was complete and the Christian missionary derive at its deadliest.... Migettuwatte picked up the glove; he challenged the Christian missionaries to open debate on the respective merits of the two faiths.... Migettuwatte both met the arguments of his opponents and demonstrated the merits of Buddhism; his success had a tremendous psychological effect; Buddhism was re-established in its former place; it was no longer possible for Christian missionaries to scoff at Buddhism since news of their defeat spread throughout the island.⁹

In fact, Gunananda had “averted the destruction of an ancient civilization.”¹⁰ It has been pointed out that Gunananda “was able to achieve within a period of 30 years what the Buddhists failed to get during the past 350 years of colonial rule.”¹¹ It is clear, therefore, that if not for the efforts of Gunananda and his victory in the controversies, Buddhism in Sri Lanka would have been reduced to a minority and insignificant religion. It was argued at that time, “now that Christianity has made its way in Ceylon... It may be said that, judging by all that has taken place in the last fifty years, Christianity is likely to supplant Buddhism,”¹² since “the influence of Buddhism is gradually decreasing with the increasing success of Christianity.”¹³ Even today the Buddhists remark, that Buddhism, “after reigning for more than twenty glorious centuries over the hearts and minds of the Sinhala race... [was] doomed to be cast as rubbish to the void”¹⁴ during the colonial era.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century Buddhism in Ceylon had indeed reached the lowest point of its power and glory... Everything Sinhalese was at a low discount if not held in open distaste and contempt and it looked as if in a manner of a few more

⁸ N.F. Weerasooria, *Ceylon and Her People Vol. IV*. Colombo: Lake House Publishers, 1971, p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 7.

¹¹ G.P.V. Somaratna, “Kotahena Riot and Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera” in *Gunananda Samaru Kalapaya*. T. Kariyawasam & P. Abayasundara ed. Colombo: Socio-Cultural Unity Ministry, 1991, p. 163.

¹² J.B. Saint-Hilarie, *The Buddha and His Religion*. London: Bracken Books, 1966, p. 364.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 365.

¹⁴ Bhikshu Sangharakshitta, *Anagarika Dharmapala: A Biographical Sketch*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication

decades both Buddhism and the Sinhalese culture would be more or less matters of interest to anthropologists and antiquarians.¹⁵

Therefore, "Gunananda's triumph at Panadura set the seal on a decade of quiet recovery of Buddhist confidence,"¹⁶ for "the emotions generated by this debate and the impact of... Gunananda's personality deeply affected the next generation of Buddhist activists."¹⁷ In these controversies "the Buddhist laity as well as the monks regained pride in their heritage."¹⁸ Even though Buddhist opposition to Christian missionary activities emerged prior to Gunananda's appearance in the scene,¹⁹ it was he who "gave the leadership and organisation to unorganised, yet disgruntled, Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka."²⁰ He became "the most brilliant polemic orator of the island... the leading figure in the Buddhist revivalist movement... Indeed, it was largely due to his efforts that a 'movement' with an organisational structure, modern tactics, and popular participation came into being to meet the Christian challenge. With him the Buddhists' reaction against the advancing forces took a systematic and determined form."²¹ It is not, then, an exaggeration to say that it was the controversies that enabled the Buddhist revival to go beyond the monasteries and to bring a greater resurgence in their religion.

The great revivalists of Buddhism were all influenced by the controversies, and their conviction that Buddhism was superior to Christianity was enforced by Buddhist victories in the controversies. Among these leaders were Colonel Henry Olcott, an American Theosophist and the Sinhalese national hero, Anagarika Dharmapala. These two leaders'

Society, 1964, p. 2.

¹⁵ B.G.Gokhale, "Anagarika Dharmapala: Toward Modernity through Tradition in Ceylon" in *Contribution to Asian Studies*, 4 (1973), p. 30.

¹⁶ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 341.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 341.

¹⁸ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 47.

¹⁹ Cf. Chapter One, pp. 24-25.

²⁰ G.P.V.Somaratna, "Kotahena Riot and Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera" p. 163.

²¹ K.N.O.Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhala Nationalism in Sri-Lanka*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 98.

activities were “one of the turning points of Ceylon’s Buddhist revival.”²²

The Buddhist revival... during the 19th century was mainly due to the newspaper reports on the famous Panadura debate... in which the Christian party was ignominiously defeated. As the western media too had published reports on the debate, many intellectuals in the West became interested in Buddhism. One of them was Colonel Henry Steel Olcott.²³

It should not be forgotten that the conversion of Olcott to Buddhism and his active role in the Buddhist revival was due to the influence of the controversies. Subsequently “round him gathered the Buddhists of Ceylon and shortly after his arrival he emerged as the second great figure of the Buddhist revival.”²⁴ The first figure is no doubt the hero of the controversies, Gunananda. Olcott’s convention at Galle in 4 July 1880 has been considered by the Buddhists as the beginning of the Buddhist revival for in that meeting Olcott had “outlined his proposed campaign for the Buddhist revival and the steps that were essential for its success.”²⁵ Dharmapala, the next major player in the Buddhist revival, was also greatly influenced by the controversies due to his association with these first two figures of the revival.²⁶ Dharmapala remarked that from Olcott’s convention at Galle “dates the present revival of Buddhism.”²⁷ According to him the Panadura debate was the “first Buddhist awakening”²⁸ and it was “the great and historic controversy.”²⁹

More than earlier events these debates, publicised by the Buddhist presses, marked the beginning of the lay Buddhist revival and reformation. When Gunananda defeated the Christians in debate at Panadura, lay Buddhists began to realise anew the potential of their own tradition.³⁰

²² D.S.Sweater, “Lay Buddhism and Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 68 (September 1970), p. 256. Some other monks were also involved in the nineteenth-century Buddhist resurgence, but it was the activities and the leadership of these two laymen that encouraged and even enabled the monks to work for the upliftment of Buddhism.

²³ S.P.Senadhira, *Under Siege: Mass Media in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Segment Books, 1996, p. 12.

²⁴ N.E.Weerasooria, *Ceylon and Her People*, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4.

²⁶ Evidence for this association is cited elsewhere in this chapter.

²⁷ *The Buddhist*, 13 June 1890, Quoted in N.E.Weerasooria, *Ceylon and Her People*, p. 6.

²⁸ In Dharmapala’s observation “the advent of the Theosophical party in Ceylon was the second awakening which the Buddhists had received since the Panadura controversy” (A.W.P.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 700). Hence it is clear that the Panadura controversy was the first awakening.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 664.

³⁰ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 48.

1. THE ACTIVITIES OF THE THEOSOPHISTS

The impact of the Buddhist Christian controversies, especially of the Panadura debate, was not confined to the island of Sri Lanka. While the Panadura debate was in progress, an English translation of the speeches were published in the *Times of Ceylon*,³¹ and in the same year the entire controversy appeared in book form.³² The English version was taken to America by James M. Peebles³³ where a second edition appeared that included his own introduction and comments.³⁴ Significantly this American edition of the Panadura debate reached the American Theosophist³⁵ Henry S. Olcott³⁶ and stimulated his interest in Buddhism and subsequently brought him to Sri Lanka. After founding the Theosophical society in New York in 1875, Olcott established contacts with Indian and Sri Lankan religious leaders and corresponded with the monks Sumangala and Gunananda. In December 1878 Olcott with his Russian associate Helena P. Blavatsky³⁷ sailed to India. Their arrival in Bombay in January 1879 aroused much interest in Sri Lanka, for the Buddhists had already begun to collect money anticipating a visit from him. In July Olcott began to publish the *Theosophist*, to which he asked Gunananda and Sumangala to

³¹ John Capper was the editor of the *Times of Ceylon* newspaper at that time, and Edward Perera translated the speeches into English (P. Abhayasundara, *Controversy at Panadura*. Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1990, pp. IX-X).

³² *Ibid.* p. IX.

³³ James M. Peebles, a former Unitarian minister happened to be in Sri Lanka at that time and he was fascinated by the Panadura debate.

³⁴ P. Abhayasundara, *Controversy at Panadura*, p. X.

³⁵ Theosophical theory is derived partly from Buddhist and Hindu sources. It states that there is an esoteric unity of all religions, and all human beings incarnate many times, according to their deeds, and the aim of life is that we should achieve our real self and our full potential by aligning ourselves to the divine will of the universal Spirit. (R. Goring, ed. *Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Books, 1995, p. 527).

³⁶ H. S. Olcott was born at Orange, New Jersey, in August 2, 1832 and died at Adyar, near Madras in February 17, 1907. H. S. Olcott and H. P. Blavatsky, who had formed the Theosophical society, had a great interest in Hinduism and Buddhism, which they saw as prototypes of the true religion. In 1879 its headquarters moved to Adyar near Madras.

³⁷ The co-founder of the Society, H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) was born in Russia. She had travelled widely and had developed an interest in the occult. She had renounced Christianity, did not conform to the Victorian social norms and was attracted to Eastern mysticism. Arriving in the USA in 1874, she moved among groups interested in spiritualism. She wrote *Isis Unveiled: A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, in 1877. Until her death she had remained the main inspirer of the theosophical movement.

contribute articles.³⁸ In fact Olcott had “furnished him [Gunananda] with considerable anti-Christian literature.”³⁹ Gunananda translated them into Sinhalese, distributed them to the Buddhist readership, and thus popularised Olcott’s name.⁴⁰ Olcott and Blavatsky came to Sri Lanka on 17 May 1880, which “marked the beginning of a new era in the Buddhist reaction to Christian missionary activities.”⁴¹ His arrival in the island “caused great excitement”⁴² and he was “received amid extraordinary scenes of religious fervour.”⁴³ In fact “they were welcomed as virtual *bodhisattvas*.”⁴⁴ As far as the Buddhists are concerned, it was “one of the most memorable events in the history of the revival and recovery of Buddhism in Sri-Lanka... which offered resistance to colonial onslaughts against religious freedom.”⁴⁵ Their activities in the island “gave a greater degree of dynamism to the Buddhist education and revival movements, which had been started earlier by *bhikkhus* Migetuwatte Gunananda and Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala.”⁴⁶

While Olcott had come to establish a branch of the Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka, the Buddhists were not particularly interested in such an organisation, their concern was the confrontations they had with the Christians and they expected “sympathy, support and guidance in this contest.”⁴⁷ Therefore, Olcott was welcomed as a potential “western champion of Buddhism,”⁴⁸ and soon after his arrival “he became the leader of the fledgling

³⁸ H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves* Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1878/1879, Vol.I, pp. 403-404, 477; Vol.II, pp. 1-2, 93-98.

³⁹ C.R. de Silva, *Sri-Lanka: A History*, p. 199.

⁴⁰ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri-Lanka*, p. 341. Concerning this Dharmapala wrote, “There was a wave of enthusiasm throughout Ceylon... Never before had there been any such visit to Ceylon from European Buddhists, and every European who had visited Ceylon knew only to attack Buddhism” (A.W.P.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 700).

⁴¹ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, pp. 230-231.

⁴² K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 341.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 341. Cf. H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Vol.2, p. 158.

⁴⁴ R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates: Buddhist Christian Controversies of Nineteenth-Century Ceylon*. Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996, p. 201.

⁴⁵ S. Karunaratne, *Olcott's Contribution to the Buddhist Renaissance*. Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1980, p. III.

⁴⁶ K.Jayawardena, “Some Aspects of Class & Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka in the Late 19th & Early 20th Centuries” in *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri-Lanka*. S.Bastian ed. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1985, p. 84.

⁴⁷ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 243.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 243.

Buddhist revival movement.”⁴⁹ He subsequently changed the course of the Buddhist revival, which resulted in a national movement that latter demanded its independence from Britain.”⁵⁰

A week after their arrival, both Olcott and Blavatsky publicly avowed their conversion to Buddhism which “served as a symbolic identification... with the Buddhist public and their cause.”⁵¹ Olcott organised the local Buddhists in the defence and rescue of their religion, which was “crushed in their own land between two grindstones... the British government and Christian missionaries”.⁵² He gave “the laymen a new sense of unity in opposing the Christians.”⁵³ Even though the Buddhist monks were aware that theoretically there was no reconciliation between Buddhism and Theosophy, and were somewhat puzzled about Olcott’s religious beliefs⁵⁴ and stance,⁵⁵ what impressed the Buddhists was “the fact that the Theosophists were anti-Christian.”⁵⁶ According to Olcott, Christian missionaries had distorted Hinduism and Buddhism⁵⁷ and he challenged them to prove that Buddhism was a false religion.⁵⁸ Even before his arrival in Sri Lanka, Olcott had written to Gunananda, stating that he had “heard of the Panadura controversy” and conveyed his “sentiments of pleasure in the expectation of standing shoulder to shoulder to fight against Christianity in Ceylon.”⁵⁹ The Buddhists cherished Olcott’s friendship for the simple reason that they found in him a potential anti-Christian activist who could help them to mitigate the

⁴⁹ D.K.Swearer, “Lay Buddhism and the Buddhist Revival in Ceylon” p. 256.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 256.

⁵¹ S.Karunaratna, *Olcott’s Contribution to the Buddhist Renaissance*, p. III. Olcott publicly avowed his conversion on 25 May 1880, by reciting the *Pansil* (Five Precepts) before the Ven. Akmeemana Dhammarama Thera at Galle. (H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves Vol.2*, p.168).

⁵² D.C.Wijayavardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple*. Colombo: Sinah Publications, 1953. p. 117.

⁵³ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ H.S.Olcott believed that Buddha was “a master adept” among several such adepts. (*Old Diary Leaves*, Vol.2, p. 169) But for the Sri-Lankan Buddhists the Buddha is a unique being.

⁵⁵ H.S.Olcott had placed clear emphasis on the non-sectarian nature of Theosophism. His first public address in Colombo was in part an eloquent protest against the idea that any one religion could claim the monopoly of truth (L.A.Wickremeratne, “Religion Nationalism, and Social Change in Ceylon” 1865-1885” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. 2, 1969. p. 125).

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 126.

⁵⁷ H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*. Vol.2, p. 165.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 175, 181.

⁵⁹ A.W.P.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 699.

influence of Christianity and restore Buddhism in Sri-Lanka.

From his first visit in 1880 until his death in 1907, Olcott came to Sri Lanka every year and took the lead in organising Buddhists in their revival of Buddhism. "It is he who presented the teaching of the Buddha in a manner suited for the new situation caused, in particular, by the presence of more powerful Christianity."⁶⁰ An important aspect of Olcott's mission was to establish Buddhist schools, of which there were only four in 1880.⁶¹ He drew the attention of Buddhists to the fact that Buddhist children had to receive their education in missionary schools. He pointed out the risk that the Buddhists were running "in leaving their children to be prejudiced against their ancestral religion by its professional enemies, who were in the country for no other object than this."⁶² He urged them to establish schools of their own which would be strong enough to counteract the influence of the missionaries.⁶³ For this purpose he launched a Buddhist educational fund⁶⁴ and insisted that the Buddhist laity should voluntarily contribute a small percentage of their salaries to support this effort.⁶⁵ His second visit in 1881 was mainly for the purpose of "raising an education fund and the rousing of popular interest in the subject of education generally."⁶⁶ Olcott, with the assistance of several monks and lay people went to almost all the villages in the Western province and the following year to villages of the Southern province, to collect money for Buddhist education.⁶⁷ His Buddhist Theosophical Society⁶⁸ initially

⁶⁰ A.Thilekaratne, "Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka 1948-1998" in *Dialogue*. XXV-XXVI (1998-1999), p. 229.

⁶¹ Even in the early 1870s some anti-missionary Buddhists had begun to establish Buddhist schools. Yet such enthusiasm was short lived. Hence by 1880 there were only four Buddhist schools were receiving government assistance (L.A.Wickremeratne, "Religion, Nationalism and Social Change" p. 129).

⁶² H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Vol.2, p. 179.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 299.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 295.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 371.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 296.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 295, 370-390.

⁶⁸ Olcott, during his first visit in 1880, founded two branches of his organisation in Sri-Lanka: one purely theosophical, which soon died, and the other, the Buddhist Theosophical Society which was theosophical only in name. The Theosophical branch was called "Lanka Theosophical Society" and was "composed of freethinkers and amateurs of occult research" (*Ibid.* p. 189). Since the Buddhists at that time "had no interest in 'occult research' and non-Buddhists had little or no interest in Theosophy" (K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 246) this society did not grow in Sri Lanka.

started Buddhist Sunday schools and then founded many normal schools. In 1889 there were 63 schools managed by the Theosophical Society and another 40 Buddhist schools were registered with the government.⁶⁹ The following year the number of Buddhist schools rose to 142. These schools brought “into being a new generation of persons educated in Buddhist schools with a great knowledge of Buddhism... to press the claims of Buddhism and see that it was given its rightful place.”⁷⁰

Another significant achievement of Olcott was his effort in bringing together into one organisation, monks of different fraternities.⁷¹ The Buddhist branch of the Theosophical Society that was founded by Olcott had two divisions – clerical and lay. The clerical division headed by Hikkaduve Sumangala had members from all the leading monks of the different fraternities. In July 1880 Olcott arranged a convention in Galle and as a result he was able to form a joint committee of monks from the two leading fraternities.⁷² Olcott had intimate connections with the monks of all fraternities and often insisted that all fraternities should work amicably for the cause of Buddhism. Even though some are not impressed by Olcott’s achievement in this respect,⁷³ “Olcott was not exaggerating when he claimed that he had gathered together the most learned and influential personalities of the low-country priesthood.”⁷⁴

The lay division of the BTS had created a strong and unified organisation for the local laity. This division, “helped to bring into one organisation not only Buddhists of different

⁶⁹ From a government report quoted in K.Malalgoda (*Ibid.* pp. 249-250). Some of the schools that Olcott founded have remained leading educational institutions to the present day. Suffice is to mention Ananda College in Colombo, Mahinda College in Galle and Dharmaraja College in Kandy.

⁷⁰ G.C.Mendis, *Ceylon Today and Yesterday: Main Currents of Ceylon History*. Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., 1963, p. 164.

⁷¹ H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Vol.2, pp. 202-203. Cf. Chapter One, Footnote 147 for an explanation on the different fraternities.

⁷² H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*. Vol.2, pp. 200-202.

⁷³ For instance, K.Malalgoda insists that the monks were already working together for the cause of Buddhism, especially in encountering the controversies with Christians, in monastic education and in the revision of the Buddhist canon from 1865-1874 at Palmadulla (*Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 247). Yet these were isolated incidents, and Olcott’s leadership had far reaching consequences.

⁷⁴ L.A.Wickremaratne, “Religion, Nationalism, and Social Change in Ceylon” p. 132.

casts and localities who had already been active in religious work, but also English-educated Ceylonese who, before the 1880s had evinced little or no interest in Buddhist propagandist work.”⁷⁵ In fact this was the beginning of the national resurgence and the independence movement that made headway during the decades that followed.⁷⁶ Thus, “the Buddhist revival of the second half of the nineteenth century was the first phase in the recovery of national pride in the island, the first step in the long process which culminated in the growth of nationalism in the twentieth century.”⁷⁷

One of Olcott’s significant contributions to Sri Lankan Buddhism was the western intellectual input he brought to bear in its resurgence. “Because of their familiarity with the rationalist scientific critique of Christianity, the Theosophists gave a more positive intellectual content to the movement against the Christian forces in Sri Lanka.”⁷⁸ Olcott also introduced to the Buddhist movement the techniques of modern organisation which the Buddhists had previously lacked.⁷⁹ Further, Olcott functioned as a mediator between the colonial government and the Buddhist community and succeeded in obtaining some favours for the Buddhists.⁸⁰ He persuaded the government to declare *Wesak*⁸¹ a public holiday⁸² and got the government to appoint Buddhist registrars.⁸³ Olcott’s Buddhist Theosophical Society also published newspapers in English and Sinhalese to propagate Buddhism and undermine Christianity.⁸⁴ Olcott’s dedication to revive Buddhism in Sri Lanka bears witness to his conviction that Buddhism was superior to Christianity, which was the inevitable and indisputable consequence of the Buddhist-Christian controversies.

⁷⁵ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 248.

⁷⁶ S.Karunaratne, *Olcott’s Contribution to the Buddhist Renaissance*, p. IX.

⁷⁷ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 343.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 341.

⁷⁹ S.Karunaratne, *Olcott’s Contribution to the Buddhist Renaissance*, p. III.

⁸⁰ When riots occurred in 1883 between Catholics and Buddhists due to a Buddhist ceremony held on an Easter Sunday near a church, Olcott was chosen by the Buddhists to present their case to the government. On another occasion Olcott succeeded in persuading the government to acknowledge the rights of the Buddhists.

⁸¹ The traditional anniversary of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death.

⁸² H.S.Olcott, *Old diary Leaves*, 60.

⁸³ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 49.

⁸⁴ The Sinhalese paper *Sarasavi Sandarasa* was began in 1880. English paper *The Buddhist* was published from 1888.

2. NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE

More than Olcott, it was Anagarika Dharmapala (1864 – 1933) who made the biggest contribution to the social, political, religious, and national resurgence in late nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. He served as a primary catalyst in transforming the Buddhist community of the island. He emerged as “the undisputed leader of the Buddhist movement”⁸⁵ of his time and within thirty years of his death he had been “transformed into a symbol of modern Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.”⁸⁶ Dharmapala’s “avowed goal was to rehabilitate Buddhism and the Sinhalese race which had become denationalised, de-religious, and degenerated owing to western conquest and western influence.”⁸⁷ He took upon himself the responsibility of rescuing Buddhism “from its low status and transforming it into an instrument for spiritual revival in Ceylon and elsewhere.”⁸⁸ Consequently, “his goals, idealism, polemicism, and nationalism are part of the current ideology of modern Buddhism.”⁸⁹ He has been regarded as “the pioneer of modern national and religious awakening,”⁹⁰ the “most important figure in the modern history of Buddhism,”⁹¹ and the “great political and religious leader of modern Ceylon,”⁹² for “with him a new era opened for the people of this country.”⁹³

The contemporary Buddhists remember him as:

The great Sinhala Buddhist patriotic and a towering personality in reviving and propagating Buddhism [who] made it a living faith in the country of its birth and all over the world.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ B.G. Gokhale, “Anagarika Dharmapala: Toward Modernity Through Tradition,” p. 31.

⁸⁶ G.Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon” in *Modern Ceylon Studies*. 1 (1970), p. 68.

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 68.

⁸⁸ B.G.Gokhale, “Anagarika Dharmapala: Toward Modernity Through Tradition” p. 35.

⁸⁹ G.Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change” p. 69

⁹⁰ P.B.Kaviratna, Forword to *Anagarika Dharmapala* by Ananda Guruge.

⁹¹ R.Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London/ New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 188.

⁹² G.Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change” p. 68.

⁹³ H.P.Abeyasekera, *Some Colourful Cameos of Sri Lankan Life*. Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 1999, p. 105.

⁹⁴ S.Sumedha, “Anagarika Dharmapala – Life Dedicated to the Cause of Buddhism, Part I” in *The Island*. 18 April 2000, p. 9.

According to Buddhists, Dharmapala “was destined to take over the torch that had been lit by Hikkaduwa Sri Sumangala, and Migethewatte Gunananda, and along with Col. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky consolidated the Buddhist resurgence and give his people a lead in national resurgence.”⁹⁵ Significantly Dharmapala was also greatly influenced by the Buddhist-Christian controversies. He had been present at the Panadura debate as a nine-year-old child,⁹⁶ and eventually became a close associate of Gunananda, the victorious hero of that controversy. The influence of Gunananda,⁹⁷ the Panadura debate and subsequently of the Theosophists had a major influence upon the life of Dharmapala. They made him scornful of Christianity and motivated him to revive the Buddhist religion and culture. Dharmapala was proud of Gunananda because he had “defeated the Christians in many debates.”⁹⁸ Concerning the Panadura debate, Dharmapala stated:

The merciless attacks of the missionaries were the cause that brought the great orator Migettuwatte Unnanse⁹⁹ to challenge the Christians, and he began his sledgehammer attacks against the pagan doctrines of Arabian Christianity. In 1873 at Panadura the great historic controversy between the Christian missionaries and the Buddhist yellow robed monks took place, and in the arena the Christian party was ignominiously defeated. That was the first moral conquest, which the Buddhists had gained against the Christians since the latter came to Ceylon.¹⁰⁰

Even though Dharmapala was educated in Christian schools and well versed in the Bible,¹⁰¹ he vehemently hated Christianity and bitterly opposed its missionary activities. Early on he suspected that the main objectives of the missionaries were the defeat of Buddhism¹⁰² and destruction of the local culture.¹⁰³ According to him the Christian missionaries were the “greatest enemies of Buddhism.”¹⁰⁴ He disliked the lifestyle of the

⁹⁵ H.P. Abeyasekera, *Some Colourful Cameos of Sri Lankan Life*, p. 105.

⁹⁶ A.W.P. Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 685.

⁹⁷ Gunananda was Dharmapala's family friend and according to the accounts of Dharmapala both met almost daily (*Ibid.* p. 685).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 685.

⁹⁹ A term used to address the Buddhist monks politely and respectfully.

¹⁰⁰ A.W.P. Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 700.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* pp. 444, 681-682.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 684.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* pp. 700, 698-699.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 667.

missionaries¹⁰⁵ and was saddened that many Sinhalese had embraced Christianity and vehemently criticised them for leaving Buddhism for the sake of worldly benefits.¹⁰⁶ Dharmapala took delight in making odious comparisons between Jesus and Buddha. He referred to Jesus as the 'Nazarene Carpenter' with disdain and emphatically declared that Jesus had 'no sublime teachings' to offer.¹⁰⁷ According to him, Jesus' parables not only revealed a limited mind but they also imparted immoral lessons and impractical ethics,¹⁰⁸ and Christianity "is a cancer for Sinhala Buddhist culture."¹⁰⁹ Evils like the slaughtering of animals, stealing, adultery, perversions, lying, drunkenness were laid at the feet of the Christians by Dharmapala.¹¹⁰ He averred that for nineteen centuries Christianity had "done more harm than good to the world."¹¹¹

Initially Dharmapala served in the Theosophical Society for six years from 1884.¹¹² In fact, his decision to associate himself with the Theosophists was prompted by Olcott's willingness to support the Buddhists in combating the attacks of the Christian missionaries.¹¹³ In 1887 Dharmapala took charge of the Sinhalese newspaper *Sandaresa* (Rays of the Moon)¹¹⁴ writing articles and exerting editorial control until 1898. He also started an English newspaper, *The Buddhist*, in 1888. He broke his ties with the Theosophical Society in 1904 when it adopted a pro-Hindu stance after Annie Besant succeeded Blavatsky as the head of the society in India. In 1906, he started his own paper *Sinhala Bauddhaya* (The Sinhala Buddhist). Under his editorship this paper was to become

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 683-684.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 700, 484.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 448.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 448.

¹⁰⁹ R.S. Ekanayake, *Human Rights and the Christian Community in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Christian Consultation of Sri Lanka, 1998, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 64.

¹¹¹ A. Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 525. Dharmapala's views on Christianity are analysed in Chapter Four.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 701.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 699, 685-686, 701, 703.

¹¹⁴ This paper was started as a weekly in 1880 and edited by Weragama Bandara, a pupil of Sumangala, who was the guiding spirit behind the paper. He picked the editorial staff, wrote articles and even made up the headlines (Y. Pannananda, *Sri Sumangala Charitaya*. Colombo: Lake House Publishers, 1947, p. 323). But by

a powerful instrument of Buddhist propaganda and cultural nationalism. From 1891 onwards, the major objective of Dharmapala was to restore Buddha-Gaya (the historical site of the Buddha's enlightenment).¹¹⁵ He made Buddha-Gaya a symbol of international Buddhism, and in 1891 (May 31) founded the Mahabodhi Society to achieve this goal.¹¹⁶ In 1893, he was invited to represent Buddhism at the Congress of World Religions at Chicago.¹¹⁷ Even when he was abroad, Dharmapala continued to maintain his links with Sri Lanka by writing articles to the papers and periodically visiting the country to engage in preaching tours. Thus he was instrumental in pushing the Sri Lankans towards independence from colonial rule and Christian influence.

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF BUDDHISM

The activities of Olcott and Dharmapala brought about a remarkable transformation in traditional Sri Lankan Buddhism which continues to the present day.

Although Buddhism has undergone a similar revival or resurgence in many countries in the twentieth century, the case of *Theravada* Buddhism in Sri Lanka has particular significance because it represents a case study in the history of religions of how a people who had almost lost their tradition along with their identity under colonialism rediscovered and reinterpreted both.¹¹⁸

Resurgent Buddhism was not only greatly influenced by the Buddhist-Christian controversies, but was also conditioned by the very Christianity that the Buddhists were attempting to contend with. Many of the methods used by the Buddhists to revive their religion at that time were in fact borrowed from the missionary movement. Since "the truth of their religion had been vindicated, the Buddhists were determined to fight their

the time Dharmapala undertook the responsibilities of this paper it came out twice a week and has become a property of the Theosophists.

¹¹⁵ A.W.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, pp. 688-689.

¹¹⁶ On the following year the journal of the society *The Maha Bodhi* was started (*Ibid.* p. 689).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 689-690.

¹¹⁸ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 3.

Christian adversaries with their own weapons – education, exhortation, and the press.”¹¹⁹

Hence Olcott advised his followers:

If you ask how we should organise our forces, I point you to our great enemy, Christianity, and bid you to look at their large and wealthy Bible, Tract, Sunday school and Missionary societies – the tremendous agencies they support to keep alive and spread their religion. ... Christians spend to destroy Buddhism, we must spend to defend and propagate it.¹²⁰

The Buddhists, “while rejecting Christianity as a faith... consciously or unconsciously modelled their religion on it.”¹²¹ Christian teaching in fact influenced the reinterpretation of Buddhism at that time. For this reason the Buddhism of the nineteenth-century resurgence has been depicted as “Protestant Buddhism.” Many of the norms and the organisational forms of the resurgent Buddhism are “historical derivatives from Protestant Christianity... [and] a protest against Christianity and its associated western political dominance prior to independence.”¹²² Ironically, the very missionaries who wished to spread Christianity throughout Sri Lanka had provided models and methods that propelled the creation of ‘Protestant Buddhism.’ Rather than replacing local religion with Christianity, they unconsciously inspired the key facets of its revival. In fact the Buddhist movement of that era was, “almost the mirror image of Protestant Christianity,”¹²³ for it had “assumed salient characteristics of that Protestantism.”¹²⁴ Such Buddhist adaptations will be analysed in this section in order to highlight the counterproductive consequences of the controversies.

By imitating the missionaries the Buddhists had established printing presses, schools, lay

¹¹⁹ G.P.Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1973, p. 301.

¹²⁰ H.S.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves* Vol.4, p. 120.

¹²¹ H.L.Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 26.

¹²² G.Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon” p. 62.

¹²³ K.M.de Silva, “Christian Missions in Sri Lanka and their Response to Nationalism 1910-1948” in *Studies in South Asian Culture*. VII (1978), p. 227.

¹²⁴ R.F.Gombrich & G.Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990, p. 7.

institutions and published periodicals, papers and books. Not only the curriculum but also the financial basis of the Buddhist schools was patterned on the missionary schools. Following the Christian method Olcott collected subscriptions and donations to maintain the Buddhist schools. He insisted that the laity should voluntarily contribute a percentage of their salaries "as was the recognised practice among Christians in the West."¹²⁵ By 1883, the Buddhists had hit upon the idea of collecting money through fancy bazaars, a method, which was popularised by the missionaries. The celebration of *Wesak*, the traditional anniversary of the Buddha's birth, Enlightenment, and death, "was revived as a counter to Christmas."¹²⁶ The institution of carol singing at *Wesak*, was "Olcott's answer to Christmas carols... The same analogy with Christmas underlies the flourishing modern trade in *Wesak* cards."¹²⁷ They even adapted Christian hymns to praise the Buddha.¹²⁸ Olcott likewise devised a Buddhist flag, which has been adopted by the World fellowship of Buddhists and is in widespread use today.¹²⁹ "The very idea of having a Buddhist flag springs from Olcott's American background."¹³⁰ In fact, almost all the activities of Olcott and Dharmapala bear witness to the influence of Protestant Christianity on resurgent Buddhism.

(A) THE REARRANGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS ROLES

The nineteenth-century Buddhist resurgence not only recovered Sri Lankan Buddhism's lost heritage but also brought considerable changes to its practices. Traditional Buddhism in Sri Lanka was primarily associated with the monks. Even in the nineteenth-century the monks had argued that, "by the laws of Buddha the laity form no part of religion. The

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 371.

¹²⁶ C.R.de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, p. 199.

¹²⁷ R.Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, p. 186.

¹²⁸ Cf. Appendix I for some examples of such adaptations.

¹²⁹ "Colonel Olcott felt the need for a symbol to rally the local Buddhists. To meet this need, he designed a flag for the Buddhists from the aura that shone around the head of the Buddha. The first five strips of the flag are blue, yellow, red, white, pink; the sixth colour is the mixture of the five, but for design, it has been broken up into its constituents" (P.B.Kirthisinghe & M.P.Amarasuriya, *Colonel Olcott: His Service to Buddhism*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1981, p. 12).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 186.

Sangha are the only living representatives of Buddhism on earth.”¹³¹ An English lawyer who served in Sri Lanka wrote in 1850 concerning his observation: “the laity are not conversant with Buddhaical [sic] doctrines, much less with the mysteries of their religion, neither are they required to observe the whole of the Triwededoos-charitie [sic].”¹³² Thus there was a clear distinction between the monks and the laity.

The role of the laity is to give material support to the *sangha*, whose members are recruited from their ranks; the *sangha* embodies their ideals and preserves the scriptures that provide the charter for those ideals. The religious goal of the laity is to be good enough to be reborn in a pleasant station, in heaven or on earth; any one who has more spiritual ambitions joins the *sangha*, who represent the ideal of detachment from both pain and pleasure.¹³³

However, the nineteenth-century Buddhist revival brought about a significant change in the role of the laity from being mere supporters of the monks to active participants in the affairs of Buddhism. This change was a direct consequence of the Buddhist-Christian controversies, because “when Gunananda defeated the Christians in debate at Panadura, lay Buddhists began to realise anew the potential of their own tradition.”¹³⁴ In fact, “Panadura is a confidence creator for lay people, preparing them for a more central role in future years.”¹³⁵ The Buddha had given relatively few instructions concerning the conduct of the laity,¹³⁶ and most of his teachings were directed towards the monks. The active participation of the laity in the affairs of Buddhism was therefore a novelty of the nineteenth-century resurgence. The activities of Olcott “mark the beginning of a new trend in Buddhism in the country, namely, the active participation of the lay people in determining the character of the *Dhamma* in a decisive manner and defending it

¹³¹ The monk Sumangala’s statement Quoted in R.Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, p. 183.

¹³² H.C.Sirr, *Ceylon and Cingalese: Their History, Government, and Religion Vol.II*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service (Reprint of 1850 Edition), 1991, pp. 113-114.

¹³³ R.Gombrich & G.Obeysekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, p. 5.

¹³⁴ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 48.

¹³⁵ E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion: The British Encounter with Buddhism in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Keleniya: Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies of the University of Kelaniya, 1993, p. 609.

¹³⁶ The Buddha’s instructions to the laity are found in *Sigalaka Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* (Maurice Walshe, tr. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996, pp. 461-469).

publicly.”¹³⁷

The Theosophical Society as it worked for the promotion of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, had a separate lay division.¹³⁸ This lay division “came to provide Buddhist laymen with what in preceding decades they had been wanting to create, a strong and unified organisation.”¹³⁹ Through this society, and especially due to the motivation of Olcott and Dharmapala, the Buddhist laity became active in promoting Buddhism. The YMBA was formed in 1898 imitating the Christian lay organisation YMCA. The resurgent Buddhism undercut,

the importance of the religious professional, the monk, by holding that it is the responsibility of every Buddhist both to care for the welfare of Buddhism and to strive himself for salvation. The traditional monastic monopoly in withdrawal from the world is called into question, while those monks (the majority) who do not become meditating hermits are criticised for lack of social involvement. The distinction between *sangha* and laity is thus blurred, for religious rights and duties are the same for all.¹⁴⁰

The Buddhist lay movement also founded Buddhist schools. Traditionally, Buddhist education was centred on the Buddhist monasteries, and one of the duties of the Buddhist clergy was to educate the laity. “The Buddhist world did not offer any educational opportunities apart from, or independently of, the monasteries. All education, sacred as well as secular, was in the hands of the monks. They had the monopoly of learning and the leisure to impart it. They were the only custodians and bearers of the Buddhist culture.”¹⁴¹ There was a village school system in ancient Sri Lanka, prior to the education at the temple, or monastery school, which provided children with some rudimentary instruction in reading and writing.¹⁴² Nevertheless, “the whole system of education, both ecclesiastical

¹³⁷ A.Thilekaratene, “Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: 1948-1998” p. 229.

¹³⁸ The clerical division of the society had monks as its members (H.Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, p. 179).

¹³⁹ K.Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 247.

¹⁴⁰ R.Gombrich & G.Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, p. 7

¹⁴¹ R.K.Mookerjee, *Ancient Indian Education: Brahminist and Buddhist*. London: Macmillan & Company, 1947, p. 394. Though Mookerjee’s observation is from the ancient India it is true of ancient Sri Lanka too (Cf.W.Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1993, p. 287).

¹⁴² P.B.J.Hewawasam, “Education in Ancient Ceylon” in *Journal of the National Education Society of Ceylon*, VII (1958), pp. 7-9.

and lay, was in the hands of the *Sangha*.”¹⁴³ With the arrival of the colonial powers however, the responsibility of the education of the country passed into the hands of the missionaries.¹⁴⁴ The missionary schools therefore displaced the traditional Sinhalese educational system controlled by the monks. This increased the alienation between the Buddhist monks and laity.¹⁴⁵ When the BTS started formal educational institutions the Christian monopoly on education ceased. The YMBA set up a national network of Buddhist Sunday schools and commissioned, printed and continued to distribute literature until these functions were taken over by the government in 1960s.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, when the Buddhists re-entered the field of education, it was not the monks, but the laity who took on the bulk of Buddhist instruction and secular education in Sri Lanka.

With the spread of government and Christian mission schools, which followed colonial expansion, the monks also lost their absolute control over the educational system. As a result of this, and for the first time in 2300 years, a new status group of non-monastic educated intellectual elite threatened to supersede the literati monks, and thereby threatened as well the structural foundation of Buddhism. This, perhaps, has been the most critical change in the entire history of Sinhalese religion.¹⁴⁷

In the subsequent history of Sri Lanka the laity played an important role building on the philosophies of Olcott and Dharmapala in promoting Buddhism.¹⁴⁸ In the mean time, the role of the monks also changed drastically as they were drawn into the political and social life of the country. Such a social role for the monks, however, was created by Dharmapala by imitating the model of the Christian priest ministering to his flock. Dharmapala had admired “the work and social commitment of Christian priests. His attacks on the power and influence of Christian priests are often inverted admirations and calls for appropriating

¹⁴³ W.Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, p. 287.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. R.Ruberu, *Education in Colonial Ceylon*. Kandy: The Kandy Printers Ltd., 1962

¹⁴⁵ H.Wriggins points out that the majority of village monks considered this alienation of the *sangha* from the laity to be “the most deleterious result of the colonial period” (*Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 188).

¹⁴⁶ R.Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, p. 187.

¹⁴⁷ M.Ames, “Ideological and Social Change in Ceylon,” *Human Organization*, XXII (Spring), 1963, p. 47.

¹⁴⁸ The lay Buddhist organisations such as YMBA could be cited as an example to this development.

these for Buddhists.”¹⁴⁹ Consequently, the monk “came to think of himself as an empowered political activist and an entrepreneur, in addition to being a caretaker of the flock,”¹⁵⁰ in contrast to his traditional role which was confined to the monasteries.¹⁵¹ The monks began to lend support to various labour strikes,¹⁵² and became members of political parties and leading voices in party propaganda, even to the present day.¹⁵³ Monks saw “nothing incompatible between following Buddhism and espousing Marxist socialism.”¹⁵⁴ The monk Udakandawela Saranankara had used “the temple sermon as a method of propagating socialist ideas.”¹⁵⁵ During 1946 and 1947 there was an ongoing debate on whether monks should participate in politics and out of this discussion emerged “the self-conscious political monks in Sri Lanka,”¹⁵⁶ who continue to play an important role in the social and political life of contemporary Sri Lanka.¹⁵⁷

(B) THE REINTERPRETATION OF TRADITIONAL BUDDHISM

The nineteenth-century Buddhist resurgence not only changed the traditional roles of the monks and laity, it also brought considerable changes in Buddhism itself. The resurgence in fact reinterpreted traditional Buddhism, enabling it to accommodate itself to the current context in a manner shaped by Christian influences. The main reason for such reinterpretation of Buddhism was the impact of Christian education upon the Buddhist

¹⁴⁹ H.L.Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, p. 27.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 27.

¹⁵¹ “The widely held conception of the central role of the monk in pre colonial Sinhala society is a myth that was invented by Dharmapala... and fostered by later advocates, both monk and lay” (*Ibid.* p. 27).

¹⁵² V.K.Jayawardena, “Bhikkus in Revolt Part 3: “Buddhist Radicals and the Labour Movement” in *Lanka Guardian*. 1 July 1979. Dharmapala himself was very supportive of the railway workers’ strike in 1912 (V.K.Jayawardena, *Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1982, p. 154).

¹⁵³ The election of 1947 marked the emergence of the Buddhist monks as supporters, speakers, legitimators and even candidates of the political parties (V.K.Jayawardena, “Bhikkus in Revolt Part 4: Yellow-robed Comrades or Pararthacharya?” in *Lanka Guardian*. 15 July 1979, p. 8).

¹⁵⁴ S.J.Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*. Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 16.

¹⁵⁵ V.K.Jayawardena, “Bhikkus in Revolt Part 3” p. 11.

¹⁵⁶ S.J.Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?* p. 18. In 1946 the monk Walpola Rahula in his book *Bhiksuvage Urumaya* (The Heritage of the monk) sought to establish that monks had from earliest times played a significant political and social role in Sri Lanka. Similarly, in 1946 the monk K.Pannasara responded to the charges by UNP politicians that monks should avoid political campaigning by declaring that politics included all aspects of public welfare, and it was the vocation of monks to direct efforts in that area.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. U.Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*. London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 1976.

leaders. The two prominent revivalists, Olcott and Dharmapala, had a rich background in a Christian cultural tradition. Hence their worldview and rationale were influenced by Christian tradition even though they vehemently opposed its teachings and mission. Their Christian education actually conditioned their reinterpretations of Buddhism to a considerable extent. For instance in 1881 Olcott published a *Buddhist Catechism* “to rival the missionary’s Catechism.”¹⁵⁸ It was nothing other than “an adaptation of a Christian method to serve a Buddhist purpose.”¹⁵⁹ It was widely used in the Buddhist schools founded by the BTS and it introduced a new approach to the study of Buddhism. According to Olcott’s catechism, Buddhism is a rational and scientific religion and relevant to the modern age.¹⁶⁰ Such an understanding of religion at first originated among the Christian missionaries due to the influence of the Enlightenment¹⁶¹ and subsequently this inspired the Buddhist revivalists too.

Both Olcott and Dharmapala depicted Buddhism as a rational and ethical religion in accordance with the canonical teachings of the Buddha. This was similar to the activities of the advocates of the Protestant reformation and the nineteenth-century missionaries. The Buddhist revivalists endeavoured to remove the popular deity worship which was interwoven with traditional Sri Lankan Buddhism. When Buddhism came to Sri Lanka, many of the local religious beliefs and practices remained. For example, in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka, people worshipped the nature spirits called *yakkhas*,¹⁶² and this has persisted in popular religion even down to modern times.¹⁶³ In addition to this, pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka

¹⁵⁸ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁹ A.Thilekaratne, “Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka” p. 229.

¹⁶⁰ H.S.Olcott, *The Buddhist Catechism*. Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1970, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Chapter One, pp. 33-34.

¹⁶² According to the primitive belief, these spirits were of the dead and “dwell in rivers, lakes, mountains and trees” though some believe that these spirits were the chiefs of the aborigines of the primitive Sri Lanka (Cf. H.Parker, *Ancient Ceylon*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service [Reprint of 1909 Edition], 1984, p. 26).

¹⁶³ S.Paranavitana, “Pre Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon” in *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. XXXI (1929), p. 305.

was influenced by Brahmanism, Saivism and Jainism.¹⁶⁴ Although Buddhism became the state religion, people continued to follow their traditional cultic practices along with their new religion.¹⁶⁵ Thus the nineteenth-century Buddhism of Sri Lanka was “an amalgam of the original Theravada Buddhism and elements of Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism.”¹⁶⁶

Olcott, however, with his western rationalistic worldview, undoubtedly influenced by Protestant Christianity, rejected the popular animistic aspects of Buddhism. Hence his catechism states that popular Buddhism “like every other religion that has existed many centuries... contains untruth mixed with truth.”¹⁶⁷ It goes on to say that “the lingering superstition of Buddhist devotees have... caused the noble principles of the Buddha’s moral doctrines to be coupled with what might be removed to advantage.”¹⁶⁸ Among the items that “might be removed to advantage” were all rituals and ceremonies, and specially the worship of the gods that played an integral part in the traditional Sinhalese religious system. Olcott’s catechism states that the Buddha opposed idol worship and points out that the Buddha condemned the worship of gods, demons, trees, etc.¹⁶⁹ Olcott “insisted on demythologising the Buddha and portraying him as an ordinary mortal, albeit one who had achieved enlightenment.”¹⁷⁰ In fact he went to the extent of criticising the sacred tooth relic.¹⁷¹ It was obvious that “the Theosophists don’t observe *sil*, light lamps, or offer flowers to the Buddha.”¹⁷² Olcott’s reformation made some Buddhists to remark that “pretty soon they will try to stop us from worshipping the Buddha altogether.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. pp. 322-326.

¹⁶⁵ H.B.M. Ilangasinha, *Buddhism in Medieval Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992, p. 183.

¹⁶⁶ K.M.de Silva, “Buddhism and the British Government in Ceylon” in *Ceylon Historical Journal*. X (July 1960-April 1961), p. 91.

¹⁶⁷ H.S.Olcott, *The Buddhist Catechism*, p.61.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 61.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 55-56.

¹⁷⁰ R.F.Young, “Imagined Beleaguerment and the Self-Representation” p. 185.

¹⁷¹ According to him it was ‘a tooth the size of an alligator’ made out of a deer’s horn, or an elk’s horn (*The Theosophist*. July 1880, pp. 164-165, 260), or a tooth of a tiger (*Sinhala Bauddhaya*. 19 May 1906).

¹⁷² A Reader’s Letter in *Rivirasa* 17 June 1888 Quoted in R.F.Young, “Imagined Beleaguerment and the Self-Representation” p. 188.

¹⁷³ A Reader’s Letter in *Rivirasa* 15 July 1888 Quoted in R.F.Young, *Ibid.* p. 188.

Likewise, Dharmapala extolled the classical Buddhism contained in the Pali canon and the great commentaries and chronicles. He seldom, if ever, alluded to practical Buddhism of his day with its mixture of spirit religion and ritualistic ceremonies. According to him, the Buddhist revival encompasses only "observing the precept of the Noble Eight-fold Path."¹⁷⁴ He lamented that, "the present spiritual condition of the Buddhist population in Ceylon is causing anxiety to the orthodox followers of Buddha. There is very little inclination shown by either clerical or the laity to observe strictly the precepts of the Noble Eight-Fold Path."¹⁷⁵ Therefore, his primary objective was "to separate canonical teachings from popular religious practices."¹⁷⁶ Buddhists in Sri Lanka generally avoid asking worldly blessings from the Buddha, but they do go to the gods and other cultic rituals for such purposes. Dharmapala pointed out the inconsistencies between Buddhist doctrines and such popular religious observances. It was his firm conviction that "no intelligent Buddhist who knows the elementary truths of Buddhism would ever care to invoke a god who is only a step higher in the evolutionary scale of progress than man."¹⁷⁷ Dharmapala insisted, "the gods are helpless to help the helpless."¹⁷⁸ According to him, the exalted state of the gods is "temporary and in the divine state also he [the god] struggles for happiness; therefore our Lord said that it is profitless to invoke a being who is in constant anxiety about his future."¹⁷⁹ Dharmapala, therefore, dismissed many of the popular rituals, which did not have a direct scriptural rationale, as "excrescences survivals of Hindu practices, which were antithetical, or at least irrelevant, to Buddhism."¹⁸⁰ This "denigration of alleged non-Buddhist ritual practices and magical manipulations [is] an attitude probably influenced by Christian missionary denunciation of heathen beliefs and practices."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ B.G. Gokhale, "Anagarika Dharmapala: Toward Modernity" p. 39.

¹⁷⁵ A.W.P.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, p. 495.

¹⁷⁶ S.Amunugama, "Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) and the Transformation of Sinhala Buddhist Organisation in a Colonial setting" in *Social Science Information*. 24 (1985), p. 720.

¹⁷⁷ A.W.P.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, p. 638.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 438.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 638.

¹⁸⁰ S.Amunugama, "Anagarika Dharmapala and the Transformation" p. 720.

¹⁸¹ S.J.Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?* pp. 6-7.

(C) THE REINTRODUCTION OF MORAL-ETHICAL NORMS

Olcott and Dharmapala gave much emphasis to the moral and ethical conduct of the Buddhists. Just as Protestant Christianity had criticised the superstitions and the ritualistic ceremonies of the Catholic Church, Buddhist reformers too castigated the ritualistic superstitions and animistic practices that were prevalent among the Buddhists and emphasised the moral and ethical teachings of the Buddha. As suggested above, it was the influence of Protestant Christianity that motivated Buddhist leaders to reform Buddhism in this manner. The Buddhist reformers went back to the canonical texts as in the same way the Protestant reformers had gone back to the biblical norms. Consequently Sri Lankan Buddhism became "a textualised Buddhism based on a Biblicist Protestant model."¹⁸²

The Buddhist movement had absorbed Victorian Protestant ethical ideas, the missionaries' rules of sexual morality as regards the conduct they prescribed for the laity, their ideas on monogamous marriage, and on divorce; and these were woven into the framework of ethics, which came to constitute part of the popular Buddhist culture. The result was that the Buddhist movement in the hand of men like Anagarika Dharmapala was almost the mirror image of Protestant Christianity.¹⁸³

Christian moral and ethical teaching, passed on via the missionary schools and educational institutions, influenced not only the Buddhist leaders, but also the laity. Even Buddhist schools that were founded by the BTS and other Buddhist organisations were patterned after the missionary schools. Hence the education imparted to the students from these institutions was typically western. The teachers who were recruited to these Buddhist schools had often been educated in mission schools, so "there was a dissemination of Victorian-Protestant ethical ideas into the culture of the elite Buddhists."¹⁸⁴ Even though the teachings of the Buddha contained high moral precepts, Buddhists had not generally emphasised them at the time of, or even prior to, the resurgence. Further, apart from

¹⁸² R.F.Young and G.P.V.Somaratna, *Vain Debates*, p. 80.

¹⁸³ K.M.de Silva, "Christian Missions in Sri Lanka and their Response to Nationalism" pp. 226-227.

¹⁸⁴ G.Obeyesekere, "Religious Symbolism and Political Change" p. 61.

Sigalaka Sutta of the *Digha Nikaya*, almost all the instructions of the Buddha were primarily addressed to the monks. While some generalised instructions were given to the laity in the *Sigalaka Sutta*, the rules of conduct for the monks were minutely regulated in Buddhist scriptures. There was no systematic code of lay ethics. In fact, “this absence of specificity regarding lay ethics facilitated the spread of Buddhism among peasant societies with diverse and even contradictory moral codes.”¹⁸⁵ In 1898, however, Dharmapala formulated a Code of Lay Ethics¹⁸⁶ thus opening a new chapter in Sri Lankan Buddhism. In fact his Code could be seen as a Buddhist imitation of a Christian discipleship manual which was undoubtedly due to the influence of Christian education.

Today Buddhist sexual morality, its monogamous marriage ideals, and divorce rules are highly cathected derivatives from Protestantism. Historically it should be noted that these ideals were never exclusively dominant in any period of Buddhism in any of the Theravada societies of South Asia prior to the 20th century.¹⁸⁷

Even today, “very few elite Buddhists are aware of the fact that in isolated traditional Buddhist villages, sexual morality and divorce may be far more ‘lax’ than in many communities in Europe or the USA. Whenever these facts are made known they are condemned as un-Buddhistic, immoral and even untraditional.”¹⁸⁸ Contrary to the claims of contemporary Buddhists, monogamy as a rule among the Sinhalese was established only after western colonisation.

Thus with the advent of the Portuguese and of Christianity certain changes took place in the traditional attitudes and customs and practices relating to marriage, sex and family life in Sri Lanka. The main factor that effected the changes was Christianity. The Christian missionaries would not tolerate such practices as polygamy, polyandry, group marriage, cross-cousin marriage, forcing children into marriage, marital infidelity, divorce, and infanticide, all of which were contrary to Christian teaching and principles. In the case of the converts they made in Sri Lanka, the missionaries

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 71.

¹⁸⁶ First published in 1898 and the nineteenth edition appeared in 1958. In it a total of 200 rules guiding lay conduct under 22 topics are elucidated.

¹⁸⁷ G.Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change” p. 61.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 62.

made every effort to eradicate such practices.¹⁸⁹

The claim that monogamy was the traditional custom of the Sinhalese and that other forms of marriage prevailed only in certain parts of the country¹⁹⁰ needs some modification. Among the aborigines of the country polygamy and polyandry were unknown systems,¹⁹¹ yet polygamy existed to some extent, especially among Sinhalese rulers and the nobility,¹⁹² and polyandry was widespread in the Sinhalese societies,¹⁹³ contrary to the claim that it "was not very widespread."¹⁹⁴ Certainly among the ancient Kandyan it was "practised freely."¹⁹⁵ Robert Knox had in fact observed such marriages in the seventeenth century.¹⁹⁶ Polyandry was common in the hill country and appears to have persisted in the littoral even after a century and a half of cultural contact with the Europeans.¹⁹⁷ The Catholic missionaries who endeavoured to eradicate this practice remarked that polyandry was "very common among these people too, because the wife of the one brother is the wife of all the other brothers as well."¹⁹⁸ Though generally it was the brothers of a family that had a common wife, sometimes non-brothers also cohabited with one woman.¹⁹⁹ Such practices

¹⁸⁹ W.L.A.D. Peter, *Education in Sri-Lanka Under the Portuguese*. Colombo: Catholic Press, 1978, pp. 290-291.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. N.D.Wijesekera, *The Sinhalese*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., 1990, p. 512.

¹⁹¹ C.J.R.Le Mesurier "The Veddas of Ceylon" in *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. IX (1886), p. 340.

¹⁹² H.W.Geiger, *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1960. p. 37.

¹⁹³ N.D.Wijesekera, "Polyandry" in *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. XI (1967), pp. 23-35.

¹⁹⁴ K.Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 1986, p. 115.

¹⁹⁵ H.W.Tambiah, *Sinhala Laws and Customs*. Colombo: Lake House Investment Ltd., 1968. p. 123.

¹⁹⁶ R.Knox states, "in this country each man, even the greatest, hath but one wife; but a woman often has two husbands. For it is lawful and common with them for two brothers to keep house together with one wife, and the children to acknowledge and call both father" (*An Historical Relation of Ceylon*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo [Reprint of 1681 Edition], 1981, pp. 248-250).

¹⁹⁷ H.W.Tambiah, *Sinhala Laws and Customs*, p. 123.

¹⁹⁸ P.da Trindade, *Chapters on the Introduction of Christianity to Ceylon*, tr. E.Peiris and A.Meersman, Colombo: Catholic Press, 1972, p. 152. Various reasons were suggested for the spread of polyandry in Sri Lanka. But it seems that the system of land tenure prevailing in Sri Lanka had caused the development of polyandry on a wide scale. According to the law, the land received by the common people from the king should not be divided among the children. To retain the tenancy, keeping the land undivided, a polyandrous form of marriage was found to be most convenient (W.L.A.D.Peter, *Education Under the Portuguese*, p. 283). "Its purpose was to preserve the properties in the family and in a family of two or three brothers it was customary for them to take a common spouse instead of separate wives as this would tend to divide the common property" (S.V.Balasingham, *The Administration of Sir Henry Ward: Governor of Ceylon 1855-1860*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1968, p. 91).

¹⁹⁹ H.Sirr, *Ceylon and the Cingalese Vol.II*, pp. 162-163.

were recognised by the Portuguese courts²⁰⁰ but the British did not countenance polyandry and polygamy, and statute law penalised such practices.²⁰¹

When the British captured Kandy, "they attempted to change the marriage laws, basing themselves largely on a Victorian moral repugnance to polyandry; marriages should be monogamous and registration was necessary if the children were to be deemed legitimate."²⁰² Polygamy as well as polyandry was abolished in 1859 by the British governor of that time, Henry Ward.²⁰³ Knox also refers to the sexual hospitality he noted among the Sinhalese.²⁰⁴ Instances of group-marriage in which several brothers cohabit with their wives in common were also known in Sri Lanka.²⁰⁵ In fact, the marriage bond was not so strong in ancient Sri Lanka.²⁰⁶

However, it should be noted that such sexual behaviour was inconsistent with the teachings of Buddha. According to him sexual misconduct was an evil, and he insisted that the married couple should be faithful to one another.²⁰⁷ Yet marital instruction did not emerge as a major concern of his teachings, for as pointed out earlier, the Buddha's instructions were addressed primarily to the monks and social reformation was not his major concern.

²⁰⁰ P.E.Pieris, *Ceylon-Portuguese Era Vol.II*, pp. 104-105.

²⁰¹ H.W.Tambiah, *Sinhala Laws and Customs*, p. 127.

²⁰² K.Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, p. 116.

²⁰³ S.V.Balasingham, *The Administration of Sir Henry Ward*, p. 91. Henry Ward's Governorship began in 1855 and ended in 1860.

²⁰⁴ R.Knox states, "in some cases the men will permit their wives and daughters to lie with other men. And that is, when intimate friends or great men chance to lodge at their house, they commonly will send their wives or daughters to bear them company in their chamber. Neither do they reckon their wives to be whores for lying with them that are as good or better than themselves" (*An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, pp. 246-247).

²⁰⁵ R.Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organization: The Kandyan Period*. Colombo: Ceylon University Press Board, 1956, p. 211.

²⁰⁶ R.Knox observed, that "their marriages are but of little force or validity. For if they disagree and dislike one the other; they part without disgrace... Both women and men do commonly wed four or five times before they can settle" (*An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, p. 248). The Portuguese historian Queyroz also makes the same observation: "Among them there is no stable matrimony nor union except so long as they like... In order to separate, each one's wish is sufficient" (F.de Queyroz, *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*. S.G.Perera tr. Colombo: The Government Press, 1930, pp. 90-91). In fact, returning the marriage gift is the principle formality that was requisite to seek divorce (H.Sirr, *Ceylon and the Cingalese Vol.II*, p. 164).

²⁰⁷ M.Walshe, tr. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, pp. 426, 467.

The Buddha was preoccupied with the human predicament and his objective was to eliminate suffering. As Buddhism spread to various parts of the world, it absorbed and adopted the local customs and practices and accommodated itself to the new culture. The result was that Buddhism and local culture grew together. "Thus in Sri Lanka, customs and conventions relating to marriage and family life developed on their own lines. Buddhism not only made no attempt to change them, but with the eclecticism characteristic of it reconciled itself to them."²⁰⁸

Though concubinage and polygamy [by this he refers to polyandry] are contrary to their religion, both are indulged in by the Singalese [sic], particularly the latter: and, it is remarkable, that in the Kandyan country, as in Tibet, a plurality of husbands is much more common than of wives. One woman has frequently two husbands; and I have heard of one having as many as seven. This singular species of polygamy is not confined to any cast or rank; it is more or less general amongst the high and low, the rich and poor. The joint husbands are always brothers... it is hardly necessary to observe that chastity is not a virtue in very high estimation amongst the Singalese[sic] women, nor jealousy a very troublesome passion amongst the men. Infidelity, certainly, is not uncommon, and it is easily forgiven.²⁰⁹

When the leaders of the Buddhist resurgence reinterpreted traditional Buddhism, the influence of Christian ethics significantly shaped the process. They eliminated much of what was contrary to Christian ethics, and incorporated many of the Christian values that they favoured.

Influenced by Victorian beliefs that the ideal unit of social organisation was the monogamous British family based on a strict moral code for women, the local new rich began to condemn the liberal marriage customs and sexual mores of the Kandyans, denouncing particularly the prevalence of polyandry and divorce by mutual consent.²¹⁰

Even though Olcott and Dharmapala strove to overthrow Christianity, consciously or

²⁰⁸ W.L.A.D. Peter, *Education in Sri Lanka Under the Portuguese*, p. 281.

²⁰⁹ J.Davy, *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of its Inhabitants with Travels in that Island*. Dehiwela: Tisara Prakasakayo [Reprint of 1821 Edition], 1983, pp. 214-215.

²¹⁰ K.Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association/Sanjiva Books, 2000, p. 249.

unconsciously they had absorbed Christian ethics and Western values into their systems. For instance, Dharmapala who avowedly rejected Western lifestyle gave clear regulations about the correct manner of using the fork and spoon in his *Daily Code for the Laity*.²¹¹ In fact, in the resurgent Buddhism, "Protestant and Western norms... [were] cathected and assimilated as pure or ideal Sinhalese norms."²¹²

(D) THE REFASHIONING OF BUDDHIST SOCIAL IDENTITY

Another significant aspect of the nineteenth-century Buddhist resurgence, especially due to the activities of Dharmapala was the refashioning of the Sinhala-Buddhist identity. While "resolving his own identity conflict [Dharmapala] also helped refashion the identity of the Sinhala-Buddhists."²¹³ Consequently the Buddhism of contemporary Sri Lanka has come to be known as 'Sinhalese Buddhism.' Such identification, i.e. the Sinhalese being identified as Buddhists, were "cultural labels of recent development in the history of Sri Lanka... [that] came into use after... the arrival of the first Portuguese colonisers. The wide spread use and diffusion of... [this term], however, is a phenomenon of British rule in Sri Lanka."²¹⁴ Even though the Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness can be traced back to the time of Vijaya, the founder of the Sinhalese race, and though this was undoubtedly strengthened during the period of conflicts and wars between the Sinhalese and South-Indian Tamils, "it was during the period of colonial rule that the Sinhala consciousness underwent a radical transformation and began to assume its current form"²¹⁵ which was, to a great extent refashioned by Dharmapala.

²¹¹ In fact Dharmapala had given 25 rules regarding the manner of eating food in his code for the laity.

²¹² G.Obeyesekere, "Religious Symbolism and Political Change" p. 72.

²¹³ G.Obeyesekere, "The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala Buddhist Identity Through Time and Change" in *Sri Lanka. Collective Identities Revisited*. M.Roberts ed., Colombo: Marga Institute, 1997, p. 369.

²¹⁴ Ibid. p. 365.

²¹⁵ R.A.L.H.Gunawardana, "The People of the Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography" in *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*. 5 (1979), p. 26. Cf. A criticism of Gunawardana's historical analysis in K.N.O.Dharmadassa, "The People of the Lion: Ethnic Identity, Ideology, and Historical Revisionism in Contemporary Sri Lanka" in *The Sri Lankan Journal of the Humanities*. XV (1989), pp. 1-35

Apart from reviving Buddhism, Dharmapala's major concern was to rescue the country from colonial rule and its people from 'Western and Christian bondage.' He instilled a sense of Sinhala-Buddhist identity in the minds of the Sri Lankans. In fact, "religious revivalism was the spur to the growth of national consciousness and the recovery of national pride"²¹⁶ in that era. According to Dharmapala "the root cause of all national problems of Ceylon was the loss of independence."²¹⁷ He constantly pointed out that Western invasion had brought about the decline of Buddhism²¹⁸ and often lamented that the colonial powers had "destroyed the ancient Buddhist monuments, and forced a Semitic religion down the throats of the Sinhalese."²¹⁹ He remarked that the British had "generally introduced the blessings of their materialistic civilisation into the land; and with this inception of the modern era the Aryan Sinhalese [had] lost his true identity and become a hybrid. Practices, which were an abomination to the ancient noble Sinhalese, have today become tolerated under the influence of Semitic sociology."²²⁰ He urged the Sinhalese, therefore, to agitate for freedom.²²¹

The state of the Sinhalese at that time also grieved Dharmapala much. He lamented that, "influenced by the money-grabbing, whisky-drinking, beef-eating, pork-loving European, the anglicised Sinhalese does not want to know whether his ancestor was an Aryan from India or a hybrid foreigner from Portugal, or... Holland. A patriot's blood boils with indignation at the sight of the present anglicised Sinhalese who neither love his country nor nation."²²² Dharmapala vehemently castigated the Western lifestyle of the Sinhalese. He exclaimed: "persecuted by the Portuguese and robbed by the Dutch the Sinhalese have lost the vitality which makes man a man... for in name and dress he [a Sinhalese] is no more

²¹⁶ K.M.de Silva, "Resistance Movements in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka" in *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited*. M.Roberts ed., Colombo: Marga Institute, 1997, p. 159.

²¹⁷ A.W.Guruge, *Anagarika Dharmapala*, p. 59.

²¹⁸ A.W.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, p. 694.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 494.

²²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 494-495.

²²¹ *Ibid.* p. 511.

²²² *Ibid.* p. 639.

than a Eurasian.”²²³ According to him “the trousered man is an incorrigible fool who wastes his money in imitating foreigners.”²²⁴ Dharmapala, “scoffed at the anglicised Sinhalese for their meaningless and slavish adoption of alien customs and habits. He poked fun at them at meetings and whenever he met them privately, he never failed to give them a piece of his mind.”²²⁵ According to Dharmapala “the so-called educated Sinhalese, the product of missionary civilisation, is a useless entity.”²²⁶

Dharmapala noted that “after a hundred years of British rule the Sinhalese as a consolidated race is on the decline.”²²⁷ He claimed that as a nation “we are blindly following the white man who has come here to demoralise us for his own gain.”²²⁸ Therefore he said, “two things are before us, either to be slaves and allow ourselves to be effaced out of national existence or make a constitutional struggle for the preservation of our nation from moral decay.”²²⁹ Dharmapala sought to re-establish a Buddhist nation in Sri Lanka modelled on the Sinhalese monarchical period. Such a nation, according to him, would bring back the glorious civilisation of Buddhist antiquity. He reminded the Buddhists that: “free from foreign influences, untainted by alien custom, with the word of Buddha as their guiding light, the Sinhalese people lived a joyously cheerful life in those bygone times.”²³⁰ He declared, “I want the whole of the present Government to be a Buddhist Government. I want the Governor to be a Buddhist. I want the colonial Secretary and all other high officials to be Buddhists.”²³¹ He exhorted the Sri Lankans: “young men of Ceylon! It is left for you to do this great work of reviving and restoring our lost

²²³ *Ibid.* p. 640.

²²⁴ A.W.Guruge, *Anagarika Dharmapala*, p. 53.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 64.

²²⁶ A.W.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, p. 525.

²²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 508.

²²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 509.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 509.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 489.

²³¹ A.W.Guruge, *Anagarika Dharmapala*, p. 53.

individuality to the great place it once occupied.”²³² Dharmapala criticised the British government for the decline of the local economy²³³ and the increase of crime and immorality.²³⁴ He often remarked, “the Britishers are giving us opium, ganja, whisky, and other alcoholic poisons and are introducing every kind of abominable vice that is undermining the vitality of our people”²³⁵. Similar criticisms were brought against Christianity too. The Christian faith together with polytheism, being blamed for “vulgar practices of killing animals, stealing, prostitution, licentiousness, lying and, drunkenness.”²³⁶

Dharmapala sought to “enable the Buddhists to address the twofold dilemma of recovering their identity and becoming responsive to the modern world with its social, political, and economic problems.”²³⁷ Recovering their true Buddhist identity was what Dharmapala considered to be the best response that the Sinhalese could make to the problems of modern society. He called on the people to abandon their attachment to a foreign identity in order to reclaim their true identity as Sinhala Buddhists.²³⁸ He tried to convince the Buddhists that their own traditional identity was nobler than that of the British.²³⁹ “Dharmapala initiated the process of identity affirmation, which has continued, into our day.”²⁴⁰

The identity affirmation which Dharmapala and other Buddhist leaders refashioned in the late nineteenth century claimed that Sri Lanka belongs exclusively to the Sinhala Buddhists. Hence all other ethnic and religious communities are aliens and have no claim

²³² A.W.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, p. 514.

²³³ *Ibid.* pp. 535, 508-509.

²³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 508, 482, 530.

²³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 764.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 482.

²³⁷ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri-Lanka*, p. 54.

²³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 55.

²³⁹ A.W.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, pp. 514, 484, 506.

²⁴⁰ G.Obeyesekere “Personal Identity and Cultural Crisis: The Case of Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri-Lanka”

to the country. This claim was substantiated by some popular beliefs and concepts of the island, one of which asserts that the Sinhalese belong to the Aryan race. Dharmapala often pointed out that Sinhalese belonged to this race²⁴¹ and reminded them “we are the lion race”²⁴². Accordingly the “Buddhists have a spiritual inheritance superior to any other worldly legacy”²⁴³ claimed Dharmapala. Hence he said that Sinhalese are

A unique race, inasmuch as they can boast that they have no slave blood in them, and never were conquered by either the pagan Tamils or European vandals who for three centuries devastated the land, destroyed ancient temples, burnt valuable libraries, and nearly annihilated the historic race²⁴⁴.

Dharmapala insisted, therefore, that the Sinhalese have the spirit of King Dutugamunu, who ruled Sri Lanka between 161-137 BCE, defeated a Tamil king after a fifteen-year war, and brought the whole island under his sway as a ‘Sinhala-Buddhist nation.’²⁴⁵ Dharmapala’s advice was: “enter into the realms of our king in spirit and try to identify yourself with the thoughts of that great king who rescued Buddhism and our nationalism from oblivion.”²⁴⁶ Consequently Dutugamunu has become an ideological hero to the Sinhalese and “surfaces in the explosive political situation of the current interethnic

in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology in Religion*. F.E. Reynolds & D.Capps, ed., The Hague: Mouton, 1976, p. 224.

²⁴¹ A.W.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*. pp. 494-495.

²⁴² A.W.Guruge, *Anagarika Dharmapala*. p. 53. Identifying the Sinhalese to the lion race goes back to the following story: The king of Kalinga had a daughter, who according to a prophecy would elope with the king of the beasts. In order to ward off the prophecy the king kept his daughter confined, but one day she managed to escape and joined a caravan of merchants. While the caravan was passing the forest, it was attacked by a lion who carried away the princess and cohabited with her. The result of this union is Sinhabahu (the lion arm) and Sinhasivali, a female. This pair grew up and became aware of their unusual life circumstances. One day the father was away on a hunt, the son removed his mother and sister and fled to his grandfather’s kingdom, where he was welcomed as the heir apparent. The son married his sister. Meanwhile the angry lion, seeing the loss of his family wrought destruction on adjacent villages. Therefore the son kills the father. The son had an offspring through his sister and was named Vijaya. He with his murderous group of 500 friends acted very much like his grandfather, the lion – killing and hunting innocent people. The King Sinhabahu banished his son and his followers. With their head shaved they were put on a ship. They landed in Sri Lanka and founded a new race – the Sinhalese, or the lion race.

²⁴³ A.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*. p. 666.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 479.

²⁴⁵ Sri Lankan chronicles record this history in detail. Even though *Dipavamsa*, the Pali chronicle written in the fourth or fifth century AD mentions this incident briefly (Chapter XVII and XIX), *Mahavamsa*, the great chronicle written two centuries latter has devoted one-third of the space to the life and career of King Dutugamunu (Chapters XXII – XXXII, pp. 146-227).

²⁴⁶ A.W.P.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 510.

Closely related to the belief of Aryan origin, is the concept of *Sihadipa*, the landing in Sri Lanka of Vijaya and the founding of the Sinhala race. According to the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa*, Vijaya, whose grandfather was a lion,²⁴⁸ was the founder of the Sinhala race and landed in Sri Lanka on the day of the Buddha’s death.²⁴⁹ In the mean time prior to his death, the Buddha had summoned Sakka, the king of the gods, to protect Vijaya in his role of establishing Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Sakka in turn handed the guardianship of the country to the god Vishnu. Hence when Vijaya and his 700 men were landed in Sri Lanka Vishnu in the guise of an ascetic sprinkled water on them and wound a thread around their wrist.²⁵⁰ Subsequently Vijaya married Kuveni a local princess but later sent her away with two children. These two children later became husband and wife and their posterity is known as *Vaddas*, the aborigines of the island. After sending Kuveni away Vijaya married a south Indian princess and his 700 men also got wives from South India, and from these unions the Sinhalese race originated.²⁵¹ These concepts “repeated time and again in the course of history in various context, literary, ritual and historical, crystallise the situation of the Sinhalese identity.”²⁵²

The third concept that the nineteenth century Buddhist revivalists popularised is also found in the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa*. This is the concept of *dhammadipa*. According to this, the Sinhalese were appointed as the guardians of the teachings of the Buddha. The *Mahavamsa* says that the Buddha himself visited the island thrice and consecrated it to be the land for his religion. On the first trip the Buddha quelled the *yakkhas* who were one of

²⁴⁷ G.Obeyesekere, “Dutthagamani and the Buddhist Conscience” in *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia: India, Pakistan, & Sri Lanka*. D.Allen, ed., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 153.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Footnote 243.

²⁴⁹ *Mahavamsa* Chapter VI, pp. 51-54.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Chapter VII, p. 55.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* Chapter VII, pp. 56-61.

²⁵² G.Obeyesekere, “The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity” p. 358.

the original dwellers of the island at Mahiyangana in the eastern part of the country. During his second visit, the Buddha had quelled the northern dwellers the *nagas*. In his final visit the Buddha went to Kelaniya, left traces of his footprints at Sumanakuta, visited Digavapi on the east coast and various places in Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of the country.²⁵³ The significance of these myths was that the island was “consecrated by the Buddha himself and evil forces... banished or subjugated preparatory to the arrival of the founder of the Sinhalese race, Prince Vijaya,”²⁵⁴ and of course the establishment and propagation of Buddhism.²⁵⁵

It should be pointed out here that the nineteenth century European Orientalists who studied the Sanskrit language claimed that it had links with the European languages and assumed that this presupposes a common racial origin which helped the development of the concept that the Aryans were a racial entity. “The latent racism in this theory was used by political thinkers of 19th century Europe... giving ideological content to racist (and later Fascist) theories based on the myth of racial purity and the superiority of the Aryans. The Hindu revivalists of India... appropriated the Aryan myth...[and] propagated the Orientalists golden age vision.”²⁵⁶ Subsequently, “the glorification of the Aryans as the chosen people who civilised the earlier inhabitants and who were the sole originators of the Indian culture was put forward as historical fact.”²⁵⁷ In nineteenth-century Sri Lanka these concepts were

²⁵³ *Mahavamsa*, Chapter I, pp. 1-9.

²⁵⁴ G.Obeyesekere, “The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity” p. 357.

²⁵⁵ Concerning these *Mahavamsa* concepts contemporary historian K.M.de Silva says, “the *Mahavamsa* and its continuation *Culavamsa* were the work of bhikkus and, naturally enough, were permeated by a strong religious bias, and encrusted with miracle and invention. The central theme was the historic role of the island as a bulwark of Buddhist civilisation, and in a deliberate attempt to underline this, it contrives to synchronise the advent of Vijaya with the *parinibbana* (the passing away) of the Buddha... This was to become in time the most powerful of the historical myths of the Sinhalese and the basis of their conception of themselves as the chosen guardians of Buddhism, and of Sri Lanka itself as ‘a place of special sanctity for the Buddhist religion’. This intimate connection between the land, the ‘race’ and the Buddhist faith foreshadowed the intermingling of religion and national identity which has always had the most profound influence on the Sinhalese” (*A History of Sri Lanka*, pp. 3-4)

²⁵⁶ K.Jayawardena, “Some Aspects of Class & Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka in the Late 19th Century and early 20th Century” in *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka*. S.Bastian, ed. Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 1985, p. 90.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 90. Concerning the Sri Lankan chronicles and about the original people of this island Paranavitana says, “As it has been with most people, the earliest accounts which the Sinhalese have preserved about their

utilised by the Buddhist revivalists.

All these false theories and myths which were floating around at the time were eagerly picked up by the Buddhist revivalists in Sri Lanka who, in the absence of a strong, nationalist ideology were turning inward in the search for an identity. They adopted the doctrine of racial superiority, glorified an idyllic past, and associated the Sinhala people with the chosen Aryan race and the chosen Buddhist faith.²⁵⁸

With Dharmapala, Buddhist identity and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism emerged as the foundation for the construction of modern Sri Lanka. He became in fact "a powerful spokesman for the new Buddhism which was breaking through its centuries old isolation and indifference and emerging as a force poised to transform the Sinhala mind."²⁵⁹

Buddhist resurgence of the late nineteenth century emerged as a counterproductive consequence of the missionary activities, and was strengthened and redefined by the controversies. The Sri Lankan Buddhists reformed their religion along essentially Protestant lines, freely utilising Western and Christian methodologies. As a result of the controversies, the Buddhists concluded that Christianity, as a religion, was inferior and a useless Western imperial ideology. Yet they saw that the methodologies employed by the missionaries were useful in propagating their religion, and they utilised them to revive Buddhism. The negative attitudes that were formed in the Buddhist mind during the time of Buddhist resurgence, however, still exist. These contemporary Buddhist attitudes towards Christianity will be surveyed in the following chapter.

origin, are bound in myth and legend. These are of a totemistic nature, and are recounted in chronicles written about the fifth century A.C. In spite of the incredible details with which they are embellished, these chronicles are generally accepted by scholars as furnishing evidence that a people speaking an Indo-Aryan dialect migrated to Ceylon from North India about five centuries before the beginning of the Christian era" (*Sinhalayo*. Colombo: Lake House Investment Ltd., 1976. p.1). K.M.de Silva adds, "in the *Mahavamsa*, that irreplaceable source for the reconstruction of the early history of the island, the story of man in Sri Lanka begins with the arrival there, sometime in the fifth century BC, of Vijaya" (*A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 3).

²⁵⁸ K.Jayawardena, "Some Aspects of Class & Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka" p. 90.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 35. K.Jayawardena doubts the historical reliability of the popular concepts about the origins of the Sinhalese. She says that identifying Vijaya and his men as Aryans is a strange legend. Even though Vijaya and his men has come from Sinhapura in Bengal, Jayawardena says that the Bengalis "do not claim to be Aryans" (*ibid.* p. 91). However, E.M.C Amunugama, claims that Vijaya belonged to an Aryan tribal group (*The History of Ancient Aryan Tribes in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: J.R.Jayawardene Cultural Centre, 1994. p.5). K.M.de Silva remarks, "beneath this charming exercise in myth making lurks a kernel of historical truth - the colonisation of the island by Indo-Aryan tribes from Northern India" (*A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 3).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONTINUING IMPACT OF THE CONTROVERSIES

The Buddhist-Christian controversies of the late nineteenth century not only enabled Sri Lankan Buddhists to counter the Christian challenge effectively and experience a recovery and a revival of their religion as the previous chapter pointed out, but also fostered a negative and superior attitude toward Christianity in the minds of the Buddhists which has continued to the present day in undermining Christian doctrines and practices. Buddhist opposition to Christianity had, in fact emerged even before the controversies, but as the first chapter has shown, took the form of sporadic and isolated responses to the individual missionary denunciation of Buddhism. But once the missionary criticism became intense to the extent of provoking the Buddhists to react and retaliate, they not only began to oppose the activities of the missionaries, but also were determined to engage in combat with the missionaries. Therefore, they entered into the controversies with the Christians and succeeded in demonstrating to the Buddhist mind that the missionary criticisms of Buddhism and the Christian religion itself were false and dubious. Consequently, the Buddhists revived and reformed their religion, and asserted it to be authentic in contrast to Christianity. Subsequent Buddhist activities have sought consciously to foster Buddhism and undermine Christianity. As a result, contemporary Buddhists generally conclude that their religion is better than Christianity and criticise its tenets and oppose the evangelistic activities of the churches. The controversies, then, strengthened the oppositional spirit in Buddhism aroused by missionary criticism, and created an enduring negative disposition among the Buddhists towards Christianity. Thus the legacy of the controversies continues even to the present day.

Contemporary Buddhist feelings and attitudes toward Christianity are aptly expressed in the report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry.¹ The committee held its sittings throughout the island for a whole year and surveyed the attitudes and aspirations of the Buddhists.² Though it is more than 40 years old now, its depiction of Buddhist attitudes towards Christianity captures the present-day Buddhist mind as well. For it says:

For 23 centuries Lanka has been nourished with the quintessence of human thought, the sublime teaching of the *Sambuddha*, the Supremely Enlightened One, and now the people of this Buddhist Lanka are being asked to give it up for crude teachings of the unenlightened teachers, for exploded beliefs, outworn theories and played-out philosophies. The Buddhists do not want to exchange gold for lead, or bread for filth; they want to hold fast to their compassionate, refined, and reasonable view of life, and their noble culture, which is founded, on the *Dhamma*.³

In this chapter, contemporary Buddhist attitudes and criticisms of Christianity will be surveyed and analysed in order to highlight the continuing impact of the nineteenth-century Buddhist-Christian controversies. It should not be forgotten that the contemporary Buddhist contempt of Christianity is not a recent development. It has its roots in the nineteenth-century controversies and the subsequent Buddhist revival. The attitudes which were formed during the period of controversies and Buddhist revival were developed and strengthened by the successive Buddhist activists. As pointed out in the previous chapter, it was the controversies that influenced H.S. Olcott and A. Dharmapala to revive and reform Buddhism. In the subsequent history of Sri Lanka, Buddhists could be seen utilising the philosophies of these leaders to promote and protect Buddhism and oppose and undermine Christianity.

There were two significant events that occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century that provided Buddhists with an opportunity to take advantage of the enthusiasm

¹ This committee was set up to inquire into the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka by the ACBC in 1954.

² From the foreword of Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, *The Betrayal of Buddhism*. Balangoda: Dharmavijaya Press, 1956.

³ *Ibid.* p. III-V.

for Buddhism promoted by the Buddhist revival. The first was the temperance movement after the excise reforms of 1912, which gave "an organisational framework... [to the] sporadic waves of the nineteenth-century revivalism."⁴ The excise reforms of 1912 separated the sale of arrack and toddy.⁵ Consequently over 1100 new toddy taverns were opened where toddy alone would be sold.⁶ This provided an opportunity for the Buddhists to gather mass support against British rule and Christianity. In fact, this was "an early manifestation of Protestant Buddhism."⁷ During the latter part of the nineteenth century Protestant missionary organisations introduced the temperance crusade to Sri Lanka and the Buddhists took up this issue in the first two decades of the twentieth century and gave it "a distinct Buddhist identity...[and] linked consumption of liquor with westernisation and Christianisation."⁸ This movement, influenced by the philosophy of Dharmapala, "protest[ed] against the western and Christian values."⁹ Subsequently there was another campaign of great significance after the 1915 communal and religious riots.¹⁰ The government, already uneasy with the Buddhists because of the temperance agitation, severely punished them for the riots and imprisoned the leaders of this campaign. "The fact that the government practically singled out the Buddhists for harassment after the riots

⁴ K.N.O.Dharmadassa, "A Nativistic Reaction to Colonialism: The Sinhala Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka" in *Asian Studies*. 12 (1974), p. 164.

⁵ Arrack in Sri Lankan usage refers to a spirit distilled from fermented coconut toddy. Toddy is relatively mild liquor derived from the coconut or Palmyra.

⁶ Before the reforms, *arrack* was produced in some two hundred and fifty small scattered stills, licensed but otherwise uncontrolled. Distribution was through renting, the monopoly of the retail sale in defined areas being sold to the highest bidder. As for toddy, its supply and distribution were subject to no legal control, but in practice the renting system gave the monopoly of retail sale of both *arrack* and toddy to the *arrack* renter, who thereby enjoyed the revenue from toddy in addition to his profits from *arrack*. The government in order to increase its revenue from excise decided to separate by law the sale of *arrack* from toddy. Hence, the island was divided into toddy selling areas and the right to sell toddy (independent of *arrack*) within each area was sold by auction. To facilitate the separate sale of toddy the government introduced over 1100 new toddy taverns, where toddy alone would be sold.

⁷ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1992, p. 62.

⁸ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 374.

⁹ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 62.

¹⁰ In August 1912, when the Buddhists of Gampola (the site of the fourth controversy) were making preparations for their annual *perahara* (procession), the Coast Moors objected to the procession passing their mosque if accompanied by music. Although it was not customary to impose silence on Buddhist processions in Kandyan province, the government agent of the central province ordered the stopping of music within a hundred yards of a mosque. Though the Buddhists won their case in the district court of Kandy, the Supreme Court reversed the decree of the district judge. In May 1915 when an annual Buddhist procession took off in Kandy, the Muslims attempted to obstruct it, and the Buddhists retaliated. This initiated the riots in many parts of the country. The British authorities declared Martial Law and the riots were ruthlessly suppressed. The government accused the Buddhists for the riots and punished them severely.

highlighted the campaign for justice as a movement to protect Buddhism and its traditional institutions.”¹¹ Subsequently, the leaders of this campaign emerged as national leaders of the country, and continued to promote Buddhism and worked towards the independence of the country from Britain.

Through the influence of Olcott and Dharmapala, the Buddhists also founded some lay institutions to propagate Buddhism and undermine Christianity. Hence in 1898 the Young Men’s Buddhist Association was formed. In 1919 various branches of the YMBA came together to form the All Ceylon YMBA congress, which later became the ACBC.¹² The leadership of these organisations overlapped, for the small group of men who led the temperance movement and the campaign after the 1915 riots served as leaders of all of them.¹³ All these men were ardent followers of Dharmapala although after the 1915 riot campaign they gave up the radical militant approach and became moderate to some extent. Nevertheless, they were “inspired by the [concepts] and activities of Dharmapala,”¹⁴ and strove to re-establish Buddhism in Sri Lanka. They “led the lay Buddhists during much of the first half of the twentieth century, had a synoptic vision of Buddhism and its restoration...they rallied to Dharmapala’s cry to revive both Buddhism and their Sinhala identity.”¹⁵ Among these leaders was D.B. Jayatilaka, who “became the senior statesman of the Buddhist lay movement”.¹⁶ His “knowledge and conviction in Buddhism were

¹¹ Fernando, Tissa “The Western-Educated Elite and Buddhism in British Ceylon” in *Contribution to Asian Studies*. IV (1973), p. 26.

¹² Rachaka, “A Short History of the Y.M.B.A. 1898-1958” in *The Buddhist*. XXIX (May 1958), p. 45.

¹³ Among them, F.R.Senanayake, D.S.Senanayake, D.B.Jayatilaka, D.R.Wijewardene, Arthur V.Dias, W.A. de Silva, Valisinha Harishchandra, and Dharmapala’s brother C.A.Hevavitharana were notable leaders. D.S.Senanayake later became the first Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. W.A. de Silva served as a president of the BTS, as general manager of the Buddhist schools operated by the BTS, as vice president of the YMBA for thirty-four years, and as a founding member and president of the ACBC (S.Gunawardena, “Dr.W.A.de Silva: Pioneer Agriculturist, Patriot and Philanthropist” in *The Buddhist*. LII [October 1981], p. 7-11).

¹⁴ H.R.Perera, *Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1988, p. 86.

¹⁵ G.D.Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, p. 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 63. D.B.Jayatilaka was born on 13 February 1868 in Waragoda the place of the second public controversy. He was preparing to commence primary education at the time of the Panadura debate. In fact, his upbringing and subsequent career was very much influenced by the social conditions of that period. He became the principal of the Buddhist High School at Kandy (present Dharmaraja College) in 1890. In 1898 he was appointed as vice principal of Ananda College and after two years became the principal of that institution. Later he became the General Manager of BTS schools and then as the secretary of the BTS. In 1917 he played a key role in the founding of a Buddhist girls school, which later developed into the present

strengthened by the erudite *bhikkhus* who were in the fore-front of the revivalist movement at that time.”¹⁷ He “realised the importance of re-vitalising and strengthening the Buddhist revivalist movement launched by the Buddhist leaders... [like Olcott, Sumangala, and Gunananda] to inspire the Buddhist population.”¹⁸ Jayatilleke also encouraged Buddhist enthusiasts all over the country to start YMBA organisations in their own areas. As president of the Colombo YMBA, Jayatilleke encouraged and helped the monks in remote villages to start Sunday *dhamma* schools in their temples for Buddhist children. The Colombo YMBA provided a common syllabus, textbooks and other necessary items for those schools.¹⁹

Since Jayatilleke and the Buddhist activists of that era were influenced by Olcott and Dharmapala, they also shared their views on Christianity. Therefore they opposed the activities of the missionaries and adopted a negative view of Christianity. Hence the legacy of the controversies continued to the following century. The account of the controversies was republished several times and thus kept the event alive in the minds of Buddhists.²⁰ It was pointed out in the introduction that the controversies still influence the Sri Lankan Buddhists against Christianity.²¹ The controversies influenced the Buddhist revivalists of the nineteenth century, and the effect of these have continued to the present day to encourage Buddhist leaders in their campaign to foster Buddhism and undermine Christianity in Sri Lanka.

leading Buddhist school in Colombo – the Visakha Vidyalaya. He also served as the first president of the YMBA in 1898 continued in that office for forty-six years until his death in 1944. Jayatilleke was arrested and imprisoned during the time of the 1915 riot campaign, and after his release went to England to press for an impartial royal commission on the riots. And when the national congress was formed by the Sri Lankan leaders to fight for independence, Jayatilleke functioned as its spokesman in England to agitate for reforms. When some constitutional reforms were granted in 1924 he contested the Colombo West seat and became a member of the council with a view to fighting for full independence for Sri Lanka. In 1931 he was elected to represent Kelaniya seat in the State council, where he functioned as the state minister of Home Affairs, leader of the House and vice president of the Board of Ministers. (K.D.G.Wimalaratna, “D.B.Jayatilleke” in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism Vol.VI*. pp. 35-37).

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 36.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 36.

²⁰ Cf. Introduction, Footnote 26.

²¹ Cf. Introduction, pp. 1-7.

1. THE BUDDHIST ATTITUDES

TOWARDS CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

Contemporary Buddhists generally do not consider the concepts and doctrines of Christianity as intellectually and morally sublime teachings. From the time of the controversies,²² the Buddhist attitude towards Christian doctrines is negative and low due to the anti-Buddhist activities of the Christians. Since Christians criticised and ridiculed the concepts and doctrines of Buddhism, Buddhists were emboldened by their victory in the nineteenth-century controversies to adopt the same methods to discredit Christianity. In this section, some of the Buddhist criticisms of Christianity that emerged as an indirect consequence of the controversies will be analysed.

(A) DHARMAPALA AND HIS DENUNCIATIONS

The major criticism of Christianity in the post-controversy period has come from Anagarika Dharmapala who was greatly influenced by the controversies. Since he is an important national hero of modern Sri Lanka his views are generally shared by contemporary Buddhists. Hence Dharmapala's exposition of Christianity will reveal much of the contemporary Buddhist view of Christianity.

According to Dharmapala Jesus was "camouflaged as the Prince of Peace."²³ He depicted Jesus as "a personality with an irritable temper," who was "quick tempered and intolerant," "impatient political visionary" and "devoid of compassion."²⁴ Jesus' parables "were all based on hatred, and destructive fury." "He taught no philosophy. He followed the profession of an African rain-doctor (Mat.10:1)... He preached the doctrine of the Sword

²² The Buddhist attitude toward Christianity prior to this is analysed in Chapter One, pp.18-28, 45-47.

²³ A.W.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 439.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 439, 440, 695.

and Discord (Mat.12:16)” and did not teach a very high morality.”²⁵ The “pronouncement made by Jesus that he hath not come to send peace on earth but a sword has come true. Since the day that he was born... cruelties [have] been perpetrated in his name... Christian nations have committed [atrocities] in the name of God and Jesus.”²⁶ Dharmapala also remarked that Jesus “was unclean in his habit. His companions were socially and morally low.”²⁷ Above all, “Jesus was an egoist” for he had “inquired of his own disciples what they thought of him (Mat.16:13).”²⁸ Therefore Jesus has a much lower moral status than the Buddha for the majority of Sri Lankan Buddhists. In contrast to such depictions of Jesus, Buddhists admire the Buddha for being compassionate, loving, meek, self-sacrificing and promoting peace and harmony. Even though Jesus possessed such characteristics, Dharmapala negatively highlighted the incidents in which Jesus showed indignation. Consequently, the Buddhists are unable to see the compassionate nature of Jesus.

According to Dharmapala Jesus’ life is an utter failure for he had died “praying to his god confessing his ignominious failure.” Consequently “no thinker or philosopher took the least notice of his philosophy which helped to create imbeciles. The few illiterate fishermen of Galilee followed him as he had made them judges to rule over Israel.”²⁹ Dharmapala also stated that Jesus’ “prophetic vision was inaccurate” for he “saw within his life time the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of Jewish race” and “spoke of the coming destruction of the world which was to take place during the life time of his contemporaries.”³⁰ Like the Western biblical critics, Dharmapala also highlighted ‘contradictions’ in Jesus’ teaching. For instance, he said that, Jesus “declared that he did not come to judge and yet later on elected himself judge to the quick and the dead on the

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 440, 452.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 457.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 440.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 452.

²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 439, 475.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 439, 464.

last judgement day. The god of love that he preached was the god who was to send the people to an eternal hell of fire... He spoke of a heaven which was to last forever, and yet he said that heaven and earth may pass away."³¹ Dharmapala also criticised Jesus as having no knowledge of agriculture. He pointed out that the parable of the sower "shows him to be ignorant of the elements of agriculture." For "no sower in Asia would go sowing seeds on barren and rocky ground... Similarly no experienced agriculturist would follow the example of Jesus who advised the man to allow the tares and the wheat to grow together." Dharmapala further said, "a mustard plant according to Jesus was a pretty large tree (Mat 13:32)... perhaps he never saw a mustard plant."³² According to Dharmapala, Jesus' parables were useless stories and irrational illustrations and taught false concepts.³³

Concerning the Old Testament, Dharmapala stated that it is "a record of a savage immorality suited only to a low type of human society." He advised that "Christians ought to reform Christianity by eliminating the Old Testament and all those passages in the New Testament that show Jesus to have been quick tempered and intolerant." According to him Jehovah was a "despotic god" who has "a despotic law of intolerance" (Deut.13:15) and whose barbaric nature is exhibited all through the Old Testament.

Jehovah was a kind of war lord, leading the Jews to fight against other races (Deut.20:3,13,16, 32:39,42, Jos.23;10). Nevertheless he was a little terror stricken when he was confronted with the 'chariots of iron' (Judges 1:19)... Jehovah was an avenging god. The spirit of compassion is foreign to him (Num.14:35, 17:46,49, 25:4, 31:17, Lev.26).³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.* pp. 439, 440.

³² *Ibid.* pp. 452, 448.

³³ According to Dharmapala the parable of the householder "is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own" is opposed to all justice (In this parable, all workers got an equal amount of wages even though their working hours were not equal Matt.20:1-16). In the parable of the unforgiving servant, the "immoral man becomes the example of the heavenly father"... In the parable of the husbandmen... "we see... utter foolishness of the owner and his want of prudence in sending his son alone to meet the husbandmen". In the parable of the wedding of the King's son "the king acted foolishly and that such as is given about the son's marriage could never have happened. It is inconceivable that a king's order to attend his son's marriage should be unanswered by the people"... In the parable of the ten virgins, "if the foolish are to be abandoned where is the necessity of a saviour... Jesus by the parable of the talents recognised usury. In that he showed his Jewish nature... Jesus applying this parable (Matthew 25:29) makes a monstrous pronouncement (*Ibid.* pp. 448-450)

³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 441, 695, 452, 453-455.

Dharmapala also questioned the activities of Jehovah prior to creation and the creation account of the book of Genesis³⁵ and said that the “creation was an utter failure.”³⁶ Among Jesus’ teachings Dharmapala appreciated the Sermon on the Mount. According to him it is “truly beautiful and high-minded in its spiritual ideal”³⁷ Nevertheless, he insisted that such sublime nature of the Sermon was due to Buddhist influence. He pointed out “it is in accord with the ethics of Buddhism... The Beatitudes harmonises with the Buddhist Eightfold Path.”³⁸

According to Dharmapala the progress of the Western world was due to scientific discoveries and “not because of Christianity”. He remarked, “Christianity has been a complete failure in Europe.”³⁹ Dharmapala’s observation was, that Christianity had helped the Europeans only to become political powers. Christianity “became under the papal hierarchy the greatest vehicle of ecclesiastic power, which it used for the retardation of human progress for more than 15 centuries, keeping Europe in a state of wretched penury and hygienic darkness.” According to Dharmapala “Christianity is a political camouflage. Its three aspects are politics, trade, and imperial expansion. Its weapons are the Bible, barrels of whisky and bullets” and “as a political force the name of Jesus had been of great service to the European nations in making them what they are today.”⁴⁰ Dharmapala firmly believed that “the birth of modern science helped to destroy the power of the Christian

³⁵ Dharmapala remarked, “the creation over which [Jehovah] was delighted had become a cause of vexation. Satan had won his two children to his side. What was god doing when Satan was conversing with Eve? Where was he? Had he taken the precaution to keep Satan off the grounds, and set the cherubim with the flaming sword to drive Satan away, how much better it would have been? Is it like the man closing the doors of his stable after the horse had been stolen?” (*Ibid.* pp. 454-455).

³⁶ Dharmapala stated, “At the creation although God blessed Adam yet we find that Jehovah could not protect the first man from falling into evil. When he had failed to protect a single individual, how could we believe that he has power to protect the world. The first family showed disobedience, the first children showed a riotous spirit. Creation was an utter failure” (*Ibid.* pp. 454).

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 695.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 696.

³⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 440, 452, 464.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pp.439, 476.

church, and also helped to bring about a change in the material comforts of the people of Europe.”⁴¹

Dharmapala's criticisms should be understood within his own historical context. He was against British colonialism and Christianisation of the country. He was greatly influenced by the controversies and the leading monks of that time. Dharmapala avowed to free the country from colonial power and the Christian religion and to re-establish the Buddhist religion and Sinhalese culture in Sri-Lanka.⁴² Hence, his criticisms of Christianity were conditioned by these avowed objectives and to a great extent they were his natural reaction to the missionary criticisms of Buddhism. Since the Christian missionaries had castigated Buddhism in a derogatory manner and attributed it to the work of the devil, Dharmapala also criticised Christianity in a similar fashion like his contemporaries. It is evident that Dharmapala used materials produced by Western critical biblical scholarship just as Gunananda had utilised them in the controversies. He spoke about Christian borrowings of ancient legendary accounts and made some attempts to point out contradictions in the Bible⁴³ His familiarity with the Western scientific knowledge of that time also enabled him to look at the Bible more critically.

(B) BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIAN THEISM

From the days of the controversies, Sri Lankan Buddhists have criticised and rejected Christian theism. Even though Sri Lankan Buddhism had absorbed almost all the deities of Hinduism,⁴⁴ and prior to the controversies was even willing to accommodate Jesus also into its pantheon,⁴⁵ the missionary criticisms of Buddhism and the controversies stopped the Buddhists from doing so. Jesus and Jehovah were depicted as demons unsuitable to be

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 405.

⁴² Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 117-124.

⁴³ A.W.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, pp. 467-468.

⁴⁴ Cf. Chapter Three, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Cf. Chapter One, p. 20.

welcomed into their pantheon. As pointed out earlier, the controversies and the subsequent Buddhist revival had given renewed emphasis to the canonical teachings of Buddhism,⁴⁶ and consequently the Buddhists highlighted the contradictions between Christian theism and Buddha's denial of a supreme god. It should not be forgotten that the contemporary Buddhist assertion of the non-theistic character of their religion is intended mainly to emphasise the unacceptability of Christian theism. This stance may be attributed to the controversies, for no such rejection was directed against the Hindu deities which were converted into their pantheon.

The teachings of the Buddha were first propagated in a theistic society. The Buddha was well aware that his contemporaries prayed to the Vedic gods and their ultimate object was to unite with Brahma.⁴⁷ They believed that Brahma is "permanent... omniscient omnipotent... [had] created the universe, the pleasures and pains people experience are due to his action... [and] the union with him is possible and there is a way to achieve this goal."⁴⁸ But, according to the Buddha, such a theistic position is an "unsatisfactory solution for men's needs... [and] a misconception of reality which is morally harmful and not at all conducive to Liberation."⁴⁹ Hence the Buddha rejected all such notions as false concepts. According to him the theistic religions are "foolish and blind talk."⁵⁰

In Buddhist literature the Brahma and other gods do not have the meaning and function they have in Hindu or Brahmanic religion. Brahma has been stripped off all of his divine attributes and reduced to a mere heavenly being subject to change and impermanence.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 108-111.

⁴⁷ *Digha Nikaya, Tevijja Sutta*. I.13.25 (M. Walshe, tr. *The Long Discourse of the Buddha*, p. 190-191).

⁴⁸ C. Wijebandara, *Early Buddhism: Its Religious and Intellectual Milieu*. Kelaniya: The Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993, pp. 112-113.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 113.

⁵⁰ C. Wijebandara, *Early Buddhism: Its Religious and Intellectual Milieu*. p. 116.

⁵¹ There are three important factors which have largely contributed towards determining the functions of the gods in early Buddhism. Firstly, the heavens have undergone change from being places of eternal bliss to places of 'temporary refuge'. Secondly, the gods too have undergone change accordingly and are no longer immortal beings in permanent states of blissful enjoyment. And thirdly, the ultimate goal changes from one

Enlightened individuals, by virtue of their enlightenment, have gone beyond the gods and therefore above gods.⁵² The Buddha and the *rahats*, having attained *nibbana* are superior to the gods and the ultimate objective of the gods is to arrive at this higher state. In the Buddhist texts, it is the gods who admire and respect the Buddha and the *rahats* and “seek the association of the Buddha and the *rahats* whether for clarification of a doubt that has arisen in their minds or for a friendly call as they find solace in their company.”⁵³ Similarly it was not the Buddha who came to the Brahma but the Brahma who came to the Buddha requesting advice or instruction and the Brahma never became an advisor to the Buddha.⁵⁴ Hence the superiority of the Buddha is well recognised by the Brahmanic gods in the Buddhist literature.⁵⁵

Throughout the Pali *Nikayas*, the Buddha is always referred to as the teacher not only of men, but of the gods as well... When we come from Brahmanism to Buddhism, the position of the gods is in fact, reversed. Instead of the men seeking gods, it is the gods who seek the enlightened men for spiritual guidance.⁵⁶

According to Buddhist cosmology, the gods are as much a part of the world of *samsara* as are the human beings or any other type of living beings. They too are therefore, subject to the same conditions of change and impermanence and the heavens are not spheres of eternal bliss. Consequently, the gods in Buddhism are not objects of prayer or of sacrifice.⁵⁷ It may be suggested that this Buddhist view of the gods, which was reaffirmed

which was to attain heaven, to one which is to surpass the heavens or more properly the conditions of gods (M.M.J.Marasinghe, *Gods in Early Buddhism*. Kelaniya: University of Sri Lanka, 1974, p. 84).

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 84.

⁵³ M.M.J.Marasinghe points out, “out of a total of about 173 recorded visits of different *devas* [gods], whether individual *devatas* or group of *devatas*, to the Buddha, as many as 127 visits are those of minor gods (named 36 and un-named 91), the majority of whom visit the Buddha to get clarification of a doubt that has arisen in their minds... Apart from these, the *Nikaya* texts record many instances of the prominent of the gods visiting the Buddha seeking such clarifications” (*Ibid.* p. 84).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 85.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 86. “In Pali the term *deva* is used to describe a class of beings who enjoy the ‘fruit of their past deeds’ in certain temporary non-human states of existence, wherein they experience feelings that are exclusively pleasant.... They do not possess power over either nature or human beings and are not the objects of prayer or propitiation. However, they do resemble the Brahmanic gods in their external characteristics, viz., they are invisible to the ordinary human eye, they have powers of aerial locomotion, etc. (*Ibid.* p. x-xi).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 43.

during the time of the controversies and the Buddhist revival is the main reason for the Buddhist rejection of Christian theism.

The contemporary Buddhist criticism of Christian theism can be seen both at the apologetic and at the philosophical level. A.L.de Silva's *Beyond Belief: A Buddhist critique of Christianity*⁵⁸ falls into the first category and Gunapala Dharmasiri's *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*⁵⁹ is an example of the latter level. A.L.de Silva's book was written primarily to enable Buddhists to confront the Christian evangelists in contemporary Sri Lanka.⁶⁰ Dharmasiri's publication was originally a PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Lancaster. Nevertheless both criticise the common arguments put forward by Christians to defend the existence of God. These criticisms not only highlight the unacceptability of the so-called rational arguments to the Buddhist mind but also indicate the apparent difficulties the Christians encounter when they employ them in their evangelistic activities among the Buddhists. According to Buddhism,

The assumption that a god (Iswara) is the cause etc. (of the world) rests upon a false belief in an eternal self; but that belief has to be abandoned, if one has clearly understood that everything is impermanent and therefore subject to suffering.⁶¹

Christianity with its theistic foundation faces rejection among the Buddhists in Sri Lanka. God is an illusion and mere imagination for the Buddhists. Since theistic faiths are deemed "unsatisfactory religions"⁶² Christianity has fallen into an unwelcome state in Sri Lanka.

(C) SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Since the days of the controversies, the Buddhists also criticised Christianity as an unscientific and primitive faith in contrast to Buddhism which according to them is scientific, logical, relevant, and meaningful in the modern context. The Buddhists, as

⁵⁸ Published by the author in Kandy, the year is not mentioned but it is a recent publication.

⁵⁹ Colombo: Lake House Investment Ltd., 1974.

⁶⁰ A.L.de Silva, *Beyond Belief*, p. 2-3.

⁶¹ Nyanaponika Thera, *Buddhism and the God Idea*, p. 24.

⁶² G.Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, p. xi.

pointed out earlier, used western scientific studies and biblical criticism in the debates to depict Christianity as an unscientific legendary cult.⁶³ Even though Gunananda did not accept Newton's discoveries,⁶⁴ the utility of science to defend Christianity was weakened once the Darwinian hypothesis became popular. Further, since the Buddhists were triumphant in their arguments against Christianity in the controversies, they have continued to allege that Christianity is opposed and contrary to modern science.⁶⁵ It is their contention that "over four hundred years, Christianity has waged war on science and lost every engagement. Today science lies at the heart of our culture and has become an irresistible force, while Christianity has been pushed into a corner."⁶⁶ Since Christianity is based on the supernatural revelation of God, and science is considered as a purely human enterprise of discovery, Buddhists conclude that Christianity is totally opposed to science.⁶⁷

According to Sri Lankan Buddhists, "the relationship between Christianity and science is an uneasy and embarrassing one."⁶⁸ They remark "the Bible ignores the rest of the universe, and sees the earth as the centre, controlled by God... Christian theology is unable to accommodate certain scientific discoveries, notably evolution."⁶⁹ The Buddhists accept evolution as a historical fact and criticise the biblical account of creation. It is their contention that "science and Christianity never went well together. Most scientists have found it difficult to reconcile their Christian beliefs and scientific research. So they keep the two in separate compartments and suspend their religion when it come to scientific research."⁷⁰

⁶³ Cf. Chapter Two, pp. 63-64, 82-85.

⁶⁴ Cf. Chapter Two, pp. 85-86.

⁶⁵ Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 135-136.

⁶⁶ Du Pre, Gerald, "Scientific Buddhism" in *Buddhism and Science*. ed. B.P.Kirthisinghe,. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993, p. 146.

⁶⁷ B.P.Kirthisinghe, "Introduction" in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 2.

⁶⁸ K.Pieris, "Buddhism, Christianity and Sri Lanka" in *The Island*, 19.1.2000, p. 14.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 14.

⁷⁰ K.Pieris, "Buddhist-Christian Interface in Contemporary Sri Lanka" in *The Island* 29.3.2000, p. 18.

In fact Buddhists condemn all religions that are based on supernatural beings and faith as “erroneous.”⁷¹ They remark that the scientific progress in the West “was made not because of faith and belief in the supernatural, but largely by rejecting it or being indifferent to it.”⁷² They say that “more progress could have been made and with less agony if religion had not interfered with scientific interpretation of reality.”⁷³ As far as Buddhists are concerned, scientific discoveries have disproved the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. They are content that the cosmology of Copernicus and Galileo is contrary to the geocentric depiction of the biblical universe. Darwinian biology is often invoked to criticise the biblical account of the creation and the fall of humanity. And modern psychology is brought forward to deny the concept of an eternal soul within the constitution of human beings. Above all, it is argued that science has denied the necessity of God. Hence, the Buddhists conclude that, “not only did science controvert the specific dogmas of the Western religion [i.e. Christianity], but it [seems] to have undermined the foundations as well as the fundamental concepts implicit in a religious outlook on things.”⁷⁴

While criticising Christianity as an unscientific religion, Buddhists claim that the Buddha was a “scientist”⁷⁵ and “the founder of scientific psychology.”⁷⁶ According to them “Buddhism is a science”⁷⁷ and the Buddhist system is a “scientific endeavour.”⁷⁸ They go to the extent of saying that Buddhism “is not a religion, or a philosophy, but a science.”⁷⁹ They claim “every new discovery in the domain of Science helps for us to appreciate the sublime teachings of the Buddha Gautama.”⁸⁰ It is their contention that “the scientific

⁷¹ B.P.Kirthisinghe, “Introduction” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 2.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁷⁴ K.N.Jayatilleke, “Buddhism and the Scientific Revolution” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁷⁶ G.Du Pre, “Scientific Buddhism” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 147.

⁷⁷ G.Du Pre, “Buddhism and Science” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 92.

⁷⁸ R.F.Spencer, “The Relation of Buddhism to Modern Science” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 95.

⁸⁰ A.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*. p. 439.

revolution does not have the same adverse effect on Buddhism as it had on other religious tradition.”⁸¹ The Buddhists justify their claim by pointing out that the methodology used by the Buddha to discover the reality of the human predicament and to diagnose its causes and finally to describe a remedy for it are scientific procedures.⁸² What the Buddha had discovered in a scientific way, the Buddhists insist, was in harmony with modern scientific knowledge,⁸³ while Christianity seems ‘utterly foolish’ when confronted with science.

D. JESUS AND HIS BUDDHIST STUDIES

Another reason for the superior attitude of many Buddhists toward Christianity is the myth of Jesus’ supposed visit to India and his supposed study under the Buddhist monks. This myth also came to Sri Lanka as an indirect consequence of the controversies as it was introduced to the Sri Lankan Buddhists by the Theosophists⁸⁴ who were drawn towards Buddhism primarily due to the Panadura debate.⁸⁵ This explains Dharmapala’s comments concerning the Sermon on the Mount, which, according to him, was adopted from Buddhist sources.⁸⁶ Since the Gospels do not give an account of Jesus’ life prior to his public ministry from the age of twelve, some have imagined and invented fanciful stories that have brought Jesus to India. This novel concept was invented for the first time by a Russian journalist called Nicolai Notovich in 1894 and many have believed it to be a true account and built their hypothesis on it.⁸⁷ From time to time in Sri Lanka, since the period of the controversies, popular newspapers have carried articles defending such a myth. In recent times Holger Kersten’s writings on this subject have been popularised in Sri Lanka. Kersten has not only argued for an Indian visit of Jesus but he has also emphasised the

⁸¹ K.N.Jayatilleke, “Buddhism and the Scientific Revolution” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 10.

⁸² B.P.Kirthisinghe, “Introduction” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 4.

⁸³ R.F.Spencer, “The Relation of Buddhism to Modern Science” in *Buddhism and Science*. p. 18.

⁸⁴ R.C.Amore, *Two Masters, One Message*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978, p. 114.

⁸⁵ Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 93-94.

⁸⁶ Cf. Chapter Four, p. 135.

⁸⁷ For instance see Levi Downing, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, California: Devorss & Co, 1981, Elizabeth Clare, *The Lost Years of Jesus*, Livingston, Mont.: Summit University Press, 1984 and Janet Bock, *The Jesus Mystery*. Los Angeles: Aura Books, 1984.

supposed Christian borrowings of Buddhism in the gospel narratives.⁸⁸ Consequently, the majority of the Buddhists do not see the need to know the teachings of Jesus, for they think that such an endeavour will not benefit them since they claim to have the original teachings of the Buddha without any distortion by the Jewish background of Jesus and later additions of the Christian church.

Since Kersten's writings are currently popular in Sri Lanka,⁸⁹ analysing his thesis will reveal the contemporary Buddhist mind to some extent. Buddhist monks have produced similar articles in local newspapers. Kersten as well as the Buddhists who are influenced by him argue that Jesus had come to India in search of truth. Kersten bases his thesis on the account of Notovich.⁹⁰ Notovich claimed to have found a Tibetan scroll, which depicted Jesus as wandering in India and Tibet prior to his work in Palestine.⁹¹ According to the supposed scroll, Jesus had left Palestine at the age of thirteen with the object of perfecting himself in the divine word and of studying the laws of the great Buddhas. He supposed to have spent six years with the Brahmins at Juggernaut, Rajagriha, Benares and other Indian sacred cities. Brahmanic priests are supposed to have "taught him to read and understand the Vedas, to cure by aid of prayer, to teach, to explain the holy scriptures to the people, and to drive out evil spirits from the bodies of men, restoring unto them their sanity."⁹² During that time Jesus is said to have preached to the 'low caste' people of India and the 'higher castes' had sought to kill him.⁹³ He is then purported to have left Juggernaut, gone to Gautamides, the birthplace of the Buddha, and begun to study Buddhism and after six years become a Buddhist preacher. He is then thought to have left Nepal and the Himalayan Mountains, descended into the valley of Rajputana, and gone towards the west,

⁸⁸ H.Kersten, *Jesus Lived in India*, Dorset: Element Books, 1995. And E.R.Gruber & H. Kersten, *The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of Christianity*, Dorset: Element Books, 1995.

⁸⁹ Some of his writings were translated into Sinhalese and serialised in newspapers as well.

⁹⁰ H.Kersten, *Jesus Lived in India*. pp. 7-20.

⁹¹ Nicolas Notovich, "The Life of Saint Issa" in Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *The Lost Years of Jesus*. Livingston: Summit University Press, 1987, p. 218.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 219.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 221-222.

preaching to diverse peoples the supreme perfection of man.⁹⁴

Many Buddhists, therefore, argue that the teachings of Jesus, particularly their ethical norms, were pure Buddhism. As pointed out earlier, Dharmapala insisted that the Sermon on the Mount was borrowed from Buddhism. Kersten argues, "the Buddhist thought is found in Jesus' teachings"⁹⁵ and states that the Sermon on the Mount is a "condensed version of Buddhism."⁹⁶ Kersten draws several parallels between Buddhism and the New Testament, not only in the teachings of the Buddha and Christ but also in their lives.⁹⁷ It was his contention that the Q source in the synoptic tradition as well as the Gospel of Thomas⁹⁸ are the oldest material containing the original teachings of Jesus and that they are highly influenced by Buddhism.⁹⁹ Further, they are "more authentic than the canonical Gospels and saturated with Buddhist ideas."¹⁰⁰ Basing his argument on J.Kloppenborg's analysis of the Q source,¹⁰¹ Kersten goes on to assert that the materials found in Q1 are taken from the Buddhist *Dhammapada*¹⁰² and *Undanavarga*.¹⁰³ He concludes, "the original Jesus taught Buddhist ideas, lived the life of a Buddhist wandering monk, and instructed his disciples in following the Buddhist path."¹⁰⁴ Therefore, several contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhists have concluded that Christianity is a distorted and inferior counterfeit of their own religion. As Kersten himself has remarked, "the orientation towards Buddhism

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 222-223.

⁹⁵ H.Kersten, *Jesus Lived in India*. P. 99-102.

⁹⁶ H.Kersten & E.R.Gruber, *The Original Jesus*, p. viii.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 79-167.

⁹⁸ This apocryphal text was discovered by Egyptian peasants in a grave at Nag Hammadi near Luxor, together with 48 other tracts from a library of Gnostic texts in Coptic (the Middle Egyptian language) in 1946. Until then the existence of this lost text is known only from the early Christian writings.

⁹⁹ H.Kersten & E.R.Gruber, *The Original Jesus* pp. 111-112.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 112.

¹⁰¹ J.Kloppenborg has divided the Q material into three sections. Q1 contains the oldest material, which comprises the wisdom sayings of Jesus. Q2 has the later additions of the prophetic and apocalyptic texts and Q3 is also a later addition, which comprises the temptation story and number of linking sections (*Ibid.* p. 113).

¹⁰² *Dhammapada* is a part of the *Tipitaka*. It has 423 verses arranged in 26 chapters, and is included in the *sutta-pitaka*, the discourses of the Buddha. Although created during the first council immediately after the enlightenment of the Buddha, it was written down only in the first century BC.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 123. *Undanavarga* is an extended collection based on the *Dhammapada*. Originally it was R.C.Amore who suggested that the Q source had partly originated in Buddhism. He concluded, "part of the Q source was heavily influenced by the *Dhamapada* and by the biography of the Buddha" (*Two Masters, One Message*. p. 181)

¹⁰⁴ H.Kersten & E.R.Gruber, *The Original Jesus*, pp. 142-143.

reveals discontent with the Christian tradition and makes apparent a feeling that the Buddhist religion is more authentic.¹⁰⁵

(E) CHRISTIANITY AND WESTERN CULTURE

Contemporary Buddhists often criticise Christianity for destroying their ancient civilisation and Buddhist culture and introducing Western lifestyle to Sri Lanka. In fact, due to colonial rule and global economic forces Sri Lanka has become westernised to a considerable extent. The traditional form of society and its culture have changed. People have adopted several forms of Western manners and values. Western education, administrative systems, and social life have become a part of Sri Lanka. Since the time of Dharmapala, Buddhists have accused the Christians of introducing immoral practices and crime in Sri Lanka despite the fact that Christianity introduced monogamous marriage and some other moral concepts to the country.¹⁰⁶ Even today the Buddhists accuse the Christians of misleading them into immorality. These criticisms are based mainly on the close association that Christianity has with Western countries and the influence of contemporary Western culture through movies and television programmes. According to the Buddhists, contemporary Western lifestyle is basically Christian, and most assume that all that comes from the West is Christian. They are not aware that the Church in the West is severely critical of the lifestyle of Western society. However, when the Sinhalese absorb Western values and customs they are criticised for adopting alien and immoral 'Christian culture.'

Christianity in Sri Lanka still has a Western outlook. Apart from some attempts to contextualise Christian theology and indigenise the liturgical formulas, Christians still follow the Western way of practising Christianity. Even the popular Charismatic way of worship is often ridiculed and criticised for introducing pop-culture to the country. In

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. viii.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 112-116.

contradistinction to the Hindu form of worship the Buddhist worship emphasises silent meditation and has few body movements. Hence, Charismatic worship, with its shouts of praises, clapping of hands, and shaking of the body, though accepted by Hindus, is not considered as proper worship and devotion by the Buddhists.

Another important criticism that is constantly made about Christianity is that this Western religion is disrespectful towards the elders. Buddhist children are taught from an early age to show respect and greet their elders.¹⁰⁷ Hence they stand up when elderly relatives and monks approach them.¹⁰⁸ They also greet their parents and elders of the family by kneeling on the floor with clasped hands at their feet.¹⁰⁹ Respect is expressed in this manner also to teachers in schools. Since Christians see such practices as a form of worship, they have completely given up this traditional way of showing respect.¹¹⁰ In fact Westernised Buddhists have also have given up these practices and the Buddhist criticism is that one of their important traditional practices has disappeared.

Christianity is also criticised by the Buddhists as bringing divisions and disharmony in the family and eradicating the extended family. In traditional Buddhist families, married brothers with their parents live in the same house. Generally after the marriage the son brings his wife to his parents' house not only to be his helpmate, but also to look after his ageing parents. Due to Western influence such attitudes among the younger generation are diminishing. Since the Bible also depicts the marriage bond as leaving the parents and cleaving to the partner, the Buddhists lay the blame completely on Christianity for dividing the long cherished extended family unit, and encouraging younger generation not to look after their parents after their marriage.

¹⁰⁷ N.Wijesekera, *The Sinhalese*. Colombo: MDGunasena & Co., Ltd., 1990, p. 476.

¹⁰⁸ H.A.P.Abhayawardena, ed. *Sinhalese Customs and Manners*, Colombo: Cultural Department, 1973, p. 48.

¹⁰⁹ N.Wijesekera, *The Sinhalese*. p. 477.

¹¹⁰ N.Wijesekera, *The People of Ceylon*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., Ltd., 1987, pp. 224-225.

Another criticism that is levelled against Christianity concerns the way some Christian churches conduct funeral services. Christians, it is alleged, instead of identifying with the bereaved family, often make it an opportunity to convert the non-Christians who are gathered to express their sympathy. Even though the Buddhists also have a short sermon in funeral ceremonies,¹¹¹ it is often pointed out that the Christians preach evangelistic sermons to convert non-Christians without being sensitive to the feelings and sadness of the people. The Buddhist speech during the funeral ceremony is short in contrast to the long sermons of the Christians. The Buddhist monks generally focus on the “impermanence of life and the need to annihilate all craving which leads to sorrow”¹¹² at a funeral ceremony. Though Christians also explain the realities of the earthly life, the emphasis on the redemption that Jesus is able to provide if anybody believes dominates the sermon. Moreover, clapping hands and singing praises to God in funeral service is criticised by the Buddhists as making a sad occasion into a seemingly joyful celebration. Further, in a Christian funeral, the gathered crowd is said to show more interest in meeting their relatives and friends and chatting to them than in expressing their sorrow and sympathising with the relatives of the dead one.¹¹³

Contemporary Buddhists often criticise Christians for being non-vegetarians¹¹⁴ and for partaking of alcoholic beverages. According to Buddhist teaching, taking the life of any sentient being is prohibited. Nevertheless a casuistical exception is made by Buddha which allows the Buddhists to eat meat without breaking the law.¹¹⁵ Accordingly “the practice [of

¹¹¹ The funeral orations i.e. praising the good works of the dead by the relatives and friends, take much time in Buddhist funerals. But the Buddhist criticism against Christian funeral is the long evangelistic sermons by the clergy.

¹¹² L.K. Witanachchi, *Customs and Rituals of Sinhala Buddhists*. Dehiwela: Sridevi Printers, 1999, p. 37.

¹¹³ A Buddhist convert to Christianity expressed such an observation.

¹¹⁴ Such criticism was directed against the Moslem community as well.

¹¹⁵ In the *Jivaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* the Buddha had made this exception. (Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, tr. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikaya)*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication society, 1995, p. 474). Commenting on that *Sutta* the translators commented: “This passage states clearly and explicitly the regulations on meat eating laid down by the Buddha for the *Sangha*. It will be noted that the Buddha does not require the *bhikkhus* to observe a vegetarian diet, but permits them to consume meat when they are confident that the animal has not been slaughtered especially to provide them with food. Such meat is called *tikotiparisuddha*, “pure in three aspects”, because it is not seen, heard, or suspected to come

eating meat] was not in itself condemned [by the Buddha], but only in so far as the partaker was in some way contributory to killing or giving pain.”¹¹⁶ However, devout Buddhists generally avoid eating meat and criticise the Christians for not being kind to animals and for being non-vegetarians.¹¹⁷ It should be noted that when Buddhism became a religion of the people it prohibited meat eating. The emperor Asoka had abolished the practice of meat eating in his royal household and later had laid down a code of regulations for the protection of animal life throughout his kingdom.¹¹⁸ Similarly, after the introduction of Buddhism, the Sinhalese kings too passed such edicts for the observance of the precept of non-killing.¹¹⁹ In fact, a general aversion to meat eating has always existed among Buddhists, whether clergy or laity. A sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary letter states, “according to the exaggerated notions of their religion they do not kill anything that has life, not even venomous snakes. They eat no meat of any kind, neither flesh meat nor fish, even if they happen to be ravenously hungry.”¹²⁰

Christianity, on the other hand does not prohibit meat eating. Hence, for Buddhists it is an alien culture that encourages meat eating which is contrary to their religious practice. Christian missionaries “regarded the Buddhist practice of non-killing and abstaining from meat as something ‘pagan’ – as something related to a ‘pagan’ religion. It was therefore a practice that was discountenanced by them, and they were anxious that converts to Christianity should eat meat like Christians in the West, as a sign of their rejection of

from an animal killed specially for the *bhikkhu*. The lay Buddhist’s precept of abstaining from the taking of life would prohibit him from killing for his food, but does not proscribe purchasing meat prepared from animals already dead” (Ibid. p. 1254).

¹¹⁶ E.J.Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, p. 129.

¹¹⁷ Apart from killing animals for food, several Westerners consider hunting as a sport which was a grave sin according to the Sri Lankan Buddhists.

¹¹⁸ This is evident from Asoka’s Rock Edict VIII and the Pillar Edict V (Quoted in Don Peter, *Education in Sri Lanka Under the Portuguese*. p. 269).

¹¹⁹ E.W.Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, p. 129. Of King Amandagamani Abhaya (19-29 AD) the *Mahavamsa* says, “on the whole island the ruler of men commanded not to kill” (35:6, p. 238). In the time of king Bhatiya Tissa (22BC-7AD) eating beef was punishable with fine (Don Peter, *Education in Sri Lanka Under the Portuguese*. p. 269).

¹²⁰ Letter of Emmanuel de Morais, 28 November 1552, Quoted in Don Peter, *Ibid.* p. 270.

paganism.”¹²¹ Hence the Buddhists criticise the Christians for forcing people to behave contrary to their religious upbringing.

Similar accusations are levelled at the Christians for introducing alcoholic beverages too. According to Buddhist precepts one should refrain from intoxicants. In fact devout Buddhists have always faithfully observed this precept. It is claimed, “two thousand years of Buddhism, with its prohibition of the use of intoxicants, had well-nigh made the Sinhalese a nation of total abstainers.”¹²² According to Robert Knox, the Sinhalese “greatly abhor drunkenness” and only a very few gave “themselves to it.”¹²³ Therefore, it cannot be denied that the excessive use of it, and making it as a normal social habit was due to the colonial rule. For the Buddhists, total abstinence is the ideal and taking liquor is wrong. But the Christians are divided on this issue, and during the time of colonialism it became a normal to drink.

Contemporary Buddhists agree with Dharmapala that “alcoholism and brutality are the dominating virtues bequeathed as a Christian legacy to the nations of Europe.”¹²⁴ However, it should not be forgotten that Christianity came to Sri Lanka with the colonial powers. Even though during the British period the missionaries functioned independently within their organisational network, they had state patronage to some extent. But under the Portuguese and Dutch it was the state that was directly involved in the propagation of Christianity. The rulers, officers, and the soldiers of the colonial governments were rarely committed Christians. Many of them behaved contrary to the moral precepts of Christianity. Their lifestyle was contrary to the Buddhist ethics, too. Buddhists generally

¹²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 270-271. Don Peter further point out, “the missionary attitude to Hindu vegetarianism was also the same. In fact, instances have been reported in India of neophytes receiving at the time of baptism a dish of meat, European cloths, and European names. We do not know of any instances of Buddhists in Sri Lanka being treated in that fashion at their baptism, but there is no doubt that Christian teaching on the subject was inculcated in the converts, and they were called upon to conform to the Christian and Western practice of eating meat” (*Ibid.* p. 271).

¹²² P.E.Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portuguese*, pp. 160-161.

¹²³ R.Knox, *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies*, p. 159.

¹²⁴ A.W.Guruge, ed., *Return to Righteousness*, p. 440.

do not differentiate the committed Christians from the nominal ones. For them all are Christians.¹²⁵ Hence the behaviour of the non-committed nominal Christian has been considered as Christian culture. On the other hand, practices such as monogamous marriage and some other ethical and social moral standards among contemporary Sri Lankans that were due to Christian influence¹²⁶ were not recognised by the majority of contemporary Buddhists as Christian virtues.

(F) CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIALISM

Buddhist antagonism of Christianity is due not only to the controversies, but also to its association with Western colonialism. Colonial rule distorted and marred the image of Christ and his teachings in the minds of the Buddhists. The persecution of Buddhism under the colonial rule has not been forgotten by Buddhists, but has created a negative disposition towards Christianity. In contrast to the peaceful arrival of Buddhism to Sri Lanka,¹²⁷ Christianity came to the island as a dreadful conquering Western force when the Portuguese arrived in the country in 1505.¹²⁸ It has been often pointed out that the conversions made by the Portuguese were “the product of the bludgeon”¹²⁹ for Christianity was “forced upon the people by means of inquisition.”¹³⁰ Hence contemporary Sri Lankans allege that Christianity was introduced to the country by the “power of the sword.”¹³¹ Such accusations have become a subject of controversy in modern times for the opinions on this

¹²⁵ For instance they still describe England as a Christian country, but they are not aware that less than 8% of the English population go to church on Sundays.

¹²⁶ Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 112-117.

¹²⁷ According to Sri Lankan historians Buddhism came to the island about the middle of the third century BC (W. Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*. Dehiwela: The Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1993, p. 48). The Sri Lankan Chronicle *Mahavamsa* narrates the arrival of Mahinda, son of King Asoka who brought Buddhism to the country and the acceptance of Buddhism by the natives (W. Geighe, tr. *The Mahavamsa*. Colombo: The Ceylon Government Information Department, 1950, pp. 88-115). By the first century BC Buddhism had spread into every part of the island (G.C. Mendis, *The Early History of Ceylon*. Calcutta: YMCA, 1954, p. 10).

¹²⁸ Cf. J.E. Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service (Reprint of 1850 Edition), 1998, pp. 1-3.

¹²⁹ H. Williams, *Ceylon: Pearl of the East*, p. 83.

¹³⁰ R. Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, (Reprint of 1803 edition) 1990, p. 8.

¹³¹ G.P. Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, p. 263.

matter among scholars differ to some extent.¹³² Nevertheless, whether the Portuguese had used force or not in making converts, contemporary Buddhist opinion is that Christianity was imposed on Sri Lankans. The use of force may not always have taken the form of threatening the people at the point of a sword; in many instances it was bringing pressure on the people that eventually led or forced them to become Christians.¹³³ Nevertheless "in cases where inducements were ineffective, the use of terror and severe reprisals followed."¹³⁴ Christianity was the privileged religion of the subsequent colonial governments, too. During the Dutch rule various laws were passed which brought pressure on non-Christians to accept baptism.¹³⁵ Under the British, even though religious freedom was there, the government favoured Christianity.

¹³² That the Portuguese, "compelled the natives to accept Christianity" is totally denied by some Christian scholars. (Cf. D.Peter, *Education in Sri-Lanka under the Portuguese*, Colombo: The Colombo Catholic Press, 1978, pp. 64-67; S.G.Perera, "A Note on Portuguese Missionary Methods in the East" in *The Ceylon Historical Journal* X (July 1960 – April 1961), p. 77; R.F.Young & G.P.V.Somaratna, *The Vain Debates*. Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1996. p. 38). Christians quote J.E.Tennent's statement "I have discovered nothing in the proceedings of the Portuguese in Ceylon to justify the imputation of violence and constraint" to substantiate their argument (D.Peter, *Education in Sri-Lanka under the Portuguese*. p. 65). Though Tennent said this in 1850 (*Christianity in Ceylon*. p. 66), he also pointed out that "the records of their government have entirely disappeared; they were taken to Goa on the conquest of the island by the Dutch, whence they were removed to Lisbon, and afterwards transferred to Brazil" (*Ibid.* pp. 7-8). Hence he remarked, "in their absence there is little or no historical evidence of the system of proselytism pursued by their clergy, or the amount of the success, beyond the imperfect notices of the Dutch historians, and the still existing traditions of the Sinhalese themselves" (*Ibid.* p. 8). Christians generally fail to take note of this information provided by Tennent. Further, nine years later when Tennent had access to the Portuguese records he had remarked, "there is no page in the story of European colonisation more gloomy and repulsive than that, which recounts the proceedings of the Portuguese in Ceylon" (*Ceylon: An Account of the Island Physical, Historical, and Topographical*. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasakayo Ltd., [Reprint of 1859 Edition], 1977, p. 547). Referring to Faria V Souza's *Asia Portuguesa* (Lisbon: 1666-75), Tennent remarked, "they appeared in the Indian Seas in the threefold character of merchants, missionaries, and pirates. Their ostensible motto was 'amity, commerce, and religion.' Their expeditions consisted of soldiers as well as adventurers, and included friars and a chaplain-major. Their instructions were, 'to begin by preaching, but, that failing, to proceed to the decision of the sword'" (*Ceylon: An Account of the Island*, pp. 547-548). After analysing the Portuguese missionary methodologies C.R. Boxer made the following observation: "Many other instances could be given to exemplify the fact that the Portuguese sometimes used force, or the threat of force, to forward their conversion policy in the East... When all due reservations and allowances have been made, the fact remains that many of the Portuguese in the East regarded themselves as forming the spearhead of militant Roman Catholic Christianity, and as such they took literally the Biblical injunction (Luke XIV, 23) to compel them to come in" ("A note on Portuguese Missionary Methods in the East" in *The Ceylon Historical Journal*. X [1960-1961], pp. 88, 90).

¹³³ D.Peter, *Education in Sri-Lanka Under the Portuguese*. p.67. C.R.Boxer, "Christians and Spices: Portuguese Missionary Methods in Ceylon" in *History Today*. VIII [May 1958], p. 348.

¹³⁴ U.Phadms, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*. London: C.Hurst & Co., 1976, p. 44.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 349. G.P.Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*, p. 264. Cf. P.E.Pieris, *Ceylon and Portuguese*, Tellipallai: American Ceylon Mission Press, 1930, pp. 78-80; T.Vimalananda, *Buddhism in Ceylon Under the Christian Powers*, Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Company Ltd., 1963, pp XX-XXX; Don Peter, *Education in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese*. p. 68-69; S.Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power in Ceylon 1658-1687*, New Delhi: Navrang Publishers, 1988, p. 220).

Contemporary Sri Lankans are of the opinion that not only the Portuguese but also the subsequent western colonial regimes used force in attempting to Christianise the natives. The Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry says that the Portuguese “occupied the maritime provinces and remained here for 150 years, oppressing and harassing the people of this country in a manner hitherto unknown”¹³⁶ and described them as “the ruthless Catholic invader from Portugal.”¹³⁷ Regarding the Dutch the report says that they were “treacherous and aggressive people who were in some respects as cruel as the Portuguese.”¹³⁸ All Christian enterprise including the British period is described as the “menace of missionary activity.”¹³⁹ Hence Christianity is viewed as a religion that sanctions and encourages the use of force to convert people and as a religion of cruelty and violence. It was natural, therefore, for the Sri Lankans to conclude that “there must be something defective or unreal in a religion which required coercion and persecution to enforce its adoption.”¹⁴⁰

Contemporary Buddhists see Christianity as a western religious sect that came to Sri Lanka mainly to destroy their religion. For, during the Portuguese rule several Buddhist and Hindu temples were demolished in the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka, statues of the Buddha and of the deities were destroyed, and several monks were killed.¹⁴¹ The Sri-Lankan Chronicle *Culavamsa* depicts the Portuguese as cruel enemies of Buddhism.¹⁴² A.Dharmapala had criticised the Portuguese in a similar way.¹⁴³ Hindu temples in the

¹³⁶ The Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry. p. VIII

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p. VIII.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. X. The report admits the fact that they “did not persecute the Buddhist; all their venom was directed against the Roman Catholics”.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 54.

¹⁴⁰ J.E.Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*. p. 70. This comment of J.E.Tennent concerning the Dutch period is equally applicable to the entire colonial period.

¹⁴¹ “In Kotte city itself, a group of *bhikkhus* led by *bhikkhu* Buddhavamsa roused the people who attacked the king’s bodyguard with sticks and stones. The riot was quelled only after Portuguese reinforcements arrived from Colombo and, in retaliation, thirty *bhikkhus* were seized and put to death” (C.R. de Silva, *The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Sitavaka (1521-1593)* in *History of Sri-Lanka Volume II*. ed. K.M.de Silva, Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, 1995, pp. 87-88).

¹⁴² Wilhelm Geiger, tr. *Culavamsa*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992, pp. 231-232.

¹⁴³ Dharmapala stated “Roman Christianity was introduced by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. For nearly one hundred and fifty years these demons in human form destroyed temples, killed thousands of

kingdom of Jaffna also suffered a similar fate.¹⁴⁴ In fact the destruction of the temples was considered by the Portuguese historians as one of the greatest achievements of the missionaries,¹⁴⁵ and according to the Portuguese historians “numerous” idols were destroyed.¹⁴⁶ “The memory of Portuguese persecution, maladministration, corruption and greed lingers in Ceylon to the present day.”¹⁴⁷ Hence contemporary Buddhists conclude, “missionary activity aided and abetted colonial exploitation.”¹⁴⁸

Although the Dutch and the British did not follow the Portuguese in demolishing Buddhist and Hindu temples, the activities of the missionaries of that period were aimed at the overthrow of Buddhism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka. The missionaries would have continued the ‘temple destroying mission’ if the government had agreed to their requests. For, the Dutch clergymen constantly urged the Dutch East Indian Company to suppress all non-Christian worship and destroy their temples and statues. But the Company was not willing to follow the missionaries as it did not want to take any action that might be detrimental to its commerce.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, the British missionaries hoped for the day when temples and idols would be completely wiped out in Sri Lanka. For instance the Methodist missionary Benjamin Clough expressed his dream as: “And O! What a sight that will be

people, outraged womanhood, threw hundreds of infants into the mouths of crocodiles, and by diabolical atrocities converted thousands Sinhalese into Roman Catholicism (ed. A.Guruga, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 482).

¹⁴⁴ Sabaratna Mudaliyar, “Relics of the Portuguese Rule in Jaffna” in *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*. Vol.V, p. 12. One of the Portuguese governors of Jaffna boasted that he had destroyed five hundred Hindu temples in that area (C.R.Boxer, “Christians and Spices: Portuguese Missionary Methods in Ceylon, 1518-1658” in *History Today*, VIII [May 1958], p. 351).

¹⁴⁵ Paulo da Trindade, *Chapters on the Introduction of Christianity to Ceylon*, tr. E.Peiris and A.Meersman, Colombo: The Catholic Press, 1972, p. 93.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 51, 97.

¹⁴⁷ C.R.de Silva, *Ceylon Under the British Occupation Vol. I*, p. 4. G.P.Malalasekera remarks: “Monasteries were razed to the ground, and their priceless treasures were looted; libraries were set fire to, or the leaves of the books they contained scattered to the winds; whosoever dared to worship in public or wear the yellow robe of the ascetic was visited with death; ... The land groaned in agony as one after another there fell, before the fierce onslaughts of the fanatic missionaries and their dastardly colleagues, the Buddhist religious edifices, those lovely structures which the piety of generations had strewn broadcast over the country. Never was a glorious civilisation and a noble culture more brutally destroyed. The work of centuries was undone in a few years – all that was noblest and best in the heritage of Ceylon was lost, and the damage thus wrought was irreparable.” (*The Pali Literature of Ceylon*. pp. 265-266).

¹⁴⁸ N.Wijesekera, *The Sinhalese*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Co., 1990, p. 561.

¹⁴⁹ J.D.Palm, “An Account of the Dutch Reformed Church in Ceylon” in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. III (1847-1848), pp. 30-32, 52-53.

when the Tempels [sic] of the Heathen are forsaken, Their (idols? Goods?) demolished and when the name of Christ shall echo thro the... the Eastern World.”¹⁵⁰

The main objective of the education system of the colonial period seems to have been the eradication of native religions and the establishment of Christianity as the country's sole religion. During the Dutch period, “education was crucial to the new policy of conversion for the children had to be indoctrinated with the faith at an early age.”¹⁵¹ It was on the schools principally, that the Dutch built their hopes for establishing the Reformed religion in this island.¹⁵² The British too had similar objectives in education. For, as Dharmapala says, “the missionaries said very frankly, we come to teach you not English but Christianity.”¹⁵³ It could be said that “the Christian missionaries saw education primarily as a means of conversion.”¹⁵⁴ W.Rahula quotes a letter written by Governor Brownrigg, and says, “this should reveal to the reader how the British Government tried to destroy Buddhism and Buddhist culture in Ceylon and to spread Christianity and western culture in its place.”¹⁵⁵ In that letter the Governor had said:

The chief object of my Government has been the religious and moral improvement of People and the propagation of the Gospel... I believe at present the most sanguine missionaries in India consider that instructing the native youth is the surest means of spreading the Gospel... I do indeed... look forward with anxious hope to the time, when after a mutual confidence has been cemented between the British government and our Kandyan subjects, a better system of education, and an effectual introduction of the Gospel, will produce the downfall of Buddhist superstition, and of the still more

¹⁵⁰ B.Clough, *Missionary Letter* 27 September 1814, Quoted in Y.Gooneratne, *English Literature in Ceylon 1815-1878*. Dehiwela: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1968, p. 90. Similarly, another Methodist missionary Robert Newstead wrote in 1818: “It is, I presume, from the radical change which produces ‘the fruits of the Spirit’ that we are to look for the final extirpation of Paganism and idolatry. It is thus that the Temples of Heathenism will be forsaken and alone – the grass shall grow in their courts and the Owls lodge in their Mausoleums– The idols shall be dishonoured and thrown down and they who worshipped them shall tread upon them and the whole gloomy machinery of the worship of demons shall gradually sink into decay and eternal oblivion while the glorious living temple of the Lord of Hosts shall rapidly tho’ silently arise (*First Report of the Wesleyan Mission native Schools on the Negombo Station*. Quoted in Y.Gooneratne, *English Literature in Ceylon 1815-1878*, p. 90).

¹⁵¹ S.Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power in Ceylon*, p. 221.

¹⁵² R.L.Brohier, “The Dutch Period of the Church in Ceylon” in *The Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon*. XXVIII (October 1938), p. 109.

¹⁵³ A.Guruge, ed. *Return to Righteousness*, p. 684.

¹⁵⁴ C.R.de Silva, *Sri-Lanka: A History*, p. 195.

¹⁵⁵ W.Rahula, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*. NewYork: Grove Press, 1974, p. 89.

vile and degrading idolatry of demon worship.¹⁵⁶

The Buddhist reformers of the nineteenth century were also aware of this fact and it was natural for them to reject Christianity, which had caused much damage to Buddhism and local culture. Hence, Dharmapala often accused the western colonial powers of destroying Buddhism and forcing Christianity on the natives.¹⁵⁷ According to him,

The Christian thinks himself to be the chosen of God, and the example of the Hebrews who destroyed the tribes of Canaan is copied by the invader when he is dealing with the native races of conquered countries.¹⁵⁸

Therefore, for contemporary Buddhists, Christianity is not a friendly religion but a formidable foe of their religion and culture.

Further, the Buddhists do not consider Christianity as a spiritual religion but as a commercial instrument of the Western colonial powers, for the major concern of the colonial rulers had been commerce and not religion. In fact "the primary objective of the Portuguese Crown in the east was the control of East-West commerce."¹⁵⁹ The Portuguese spread their religion with the hope that the citizens of the conquered country would be faithful to the King of Portugal and would not become a hindrance to their commercial enterprise. For, religious conversion was considered as "a link that would bind the new subjects to their colonial masters."¹⁶⁰ The Portuguese search was for "Christians and Spices" and these dual goals "epitomised the religious and economic motives, which brought the Portuguese to the East at the end of the fifteenth century."¹⁶¹

The subsequent Dutch rule also had the same emphasis on commerce. The Dutch rule in

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Rahula, *Ibid.* pp. 86-89.

¹⁵⁷ A.Guruge, *Return to Righteousness*, p. 494.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 405.

¹⁵⁹ C.R.de Silva, *Sri-Lanka: A History*, p. 126.

¹⁶⁰ W.L.A.Don Peter, *Education in Sri Lanka Under the Portuguese*, p.18.

¹⁶¹ C.R.Boxer, "Asia and Africa – The Portuguese in the East AD 1500-1800" in *Portugal and Brazil*. H.V.Livermore ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953, pp. 185-224.

Sri Lanka consisted of the administration in the hands of the Dutch East India Company,¹⁶² and the “primary aim of the Dutch in the first few decades of the seventeenth century was the securing of a monopoly of the spice trade.”¹⁶³ The Dutch Reformed Church in Sri Lanka was dominated by “the East Indian Company with its prevailing commercial and political interests.”¹⁶⁴ Hence the church “did not enjoy the status of an independent mission,”¹⁶⁵ but “it was a department of government, and all its operations were subject to the scrutiny of the Governor and his council.”¹⁶⁶ Such control of the Company over the affairs of the church created a negative impression upon the Buddhists about Christianity. The Sri Lankans, therefore, think that Christianity was nothing else than an arm of the commercial enterprise of the colonial rulers.

The Dutch rule in Sri Lanka came to an end in 1796 and the British East India Company replaced the Dutch Company in the east. The island was transferred from the British East India Company to the British Crown by the Treaty of Amiens in 1802.¹⁶⁷ Even though this brought religious tolerance and freedom to the country, the British continued to give prominence to commerce by introducing the plantation industry – beginning with coffee, and then tea, rubber, and coconut. The growth of the plantation sector contributed to the increasing control of the economy by the colonial rulers.¹⁶⁸ Even the missionaries of that era were of the opinion that commerce and industry were a proper sphere for English

¹⁶² The Dutch East India Company was founded in 1602 and obtained the State General of United Netherlands for the monopoly of trade in the East Indian seas. The management of the company was vested in a committee of 17 directors. The Company though started as a commercial enterprise, in course of time became a political power in the East and conquered several countries there.

¹⁶³ C.R.de Silva, *Sri-Lanka: A History*, p. 134.

¹⁶⁴ R.S.Greenway, *The Dutch Reformed Church in Ceylon 1642-1796*, Unpublished MTh. Dissertation, Grand Rapids: Calvin Seminary, 1963, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵ K.M.de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, p. 196.

¹⁶⁶ R.S.Greenway, *The Dutch Reformed Church in Ceylon*, p. 165.

¹⁶⁷ From 1798-1802 British possessions in Sri Lanka were ruled by a governor appointed by the Crown but working under the Governor-General of India and the directors of the east India Company. This system of ‘dual control’ proved unsatisfactory and in 1802 the Maritime Provinces were made a British Crown Colony controlled directly from London. The East India Company, however, retained a monopoly of the cinnamon trade for a further twenty years (Chandra R.de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History*, p. 165).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 181.

Protestantism.¹⁶⁹ They “propagated the view that capitalism was a divinely sanctioned economic system destined to uplift the heathen.”¹⁷⁰ All three colonial regimes focused much attention on commerce in order to increase their material wealth. Therefore, contemporary Buddhists, by comparing them with King Asoka who sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka to spread Buddhism without expecting anything from Sri Lankans, conclude that the Indian emperor is spiritually higher than the European colonists and that Buddhism is superior to Christianity in the sense that the former is devoid of selfish gain and the latter is full of corruption, exploitation, and injustice.

2. BUDDHIST ANIMOSITY TOWARDS CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

Contemporary Buddhists not only criticise Christian doctrines and practices, but also oppose the evangelistic activities of the Christian church. As pointed out in the first chapter Buddhist opposition to Christian mission had emerged as a natural outcome of the missionary criticism of Buddhism in the nineteenth century and was been strengthened by the controversies and is so to the present day. As the previous chapter indicated, one of the inevitable consequences of the controversies was the emergence of the Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness.¹⁷¹ Consequently, ever since the time of the controversies Buddhists have asserted vigorously, “Sri Lanka is the land of the Sinhalese Buddhists. Therefore the Sinhala language, Sinhala culture and Buddhism should receive the position enjoyed during the times of ancient Sinhalese Kings.”¹⁷² Christian evangelism is considered as “a severe attack on the Sinhala race and Buddhism.”¹⁷³ Hence the Buddhists oppose the

¹⁶⁹ R.S.Hardy, *Commerce and Christianity*, pp. 191-195.

¹⁷⁰ K.Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies*. Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 2000, p. 252.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 117-124.

¹⁷² From a speech made by Harischandra Wijetunga, the leader of the *Sinhalage Bhumiputra* (Sons of the Soil of the Sinhalese) party, published in *Divayina*, 22 August 1988. Similar ideas were expressed by Anagarika Dharmapala Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 117-124.

¹⁷³ *The Island*. 14 January 1997, p. 2.

expansion of the Christian church in contemporary Sri Lanka just as the nineteenth-century Buddhist revivalists resisted the activities of the missionaries.

(A) CONTEMPORARY CHURCH GROWTH

During the latter part of the twentieth century the growing charismatic movement has helped formed a large number of new churches in many cities and villages.¹⁷⁴ Further, “there are strong evangelical elements within the mainline Protestant denominations which see a pressing need for conversions to Christianity as central to their witness.”¹⁷⁵ Contemporary Buddhists see the emerging new churches from these evangelical groups as a new wave of colonialism. Hence, Christians are attacked as “fragments of colonialism”¹⁷⁶ and “elements of foreign influence.”¹⁷⁷ Buddhists interpret the activities of the new churches as a “secret project to invade Sinhala Buddhist society with the aid of western imperialists.”¹⁷⁸ Some have even equated the activities of the Christian churches and organisations with the Tamil militants who fight for a separate homeland in Sri Lanka.¹⁷⁹

Since a large number of the newly established churches are directly influenced by the religious ideas of the west and receive funds from foreign countries, the Buddhists can maintain with some justification that the western imperial powers are ‘conspiring to capture Sri Lanka once again’.¹⁸⁰ Hence, the Buddhists are determined to oppose the evangelistic activities of the Christians and prevent the spread of Christianity. In 1988 ACBC pleaded with the government, saying that, “the government should take steps to

¹⁷⁴ There are no systematic historical records for most of these new churches. These churches have been multiplied since the early 1980s.

¹⁷⁵ E.Harris, “Conversion and Evangelism: Reflections from Sri Lanka” in *World Faiths Encounter* X (March 1995), p. 4.

¹⁷⁶ “The close association between Christianity and the colonial past has encouraged the Sri-Lankans to look upon Christianity as a handmaiden of colonialism.... [and] as a part of colonial heritage” (G.P.V.Somaratna, “Christianity in Sri-Lanka in the Anuradhapura Period” in *Dharma Deepika*. Vol.2 [December 1996], p. 72).

¹⁷⁷ G.P.V.Somaratna, “Beleaguered Christianity in Contemporary Sri Lanka” in *Asia Journal of Theology*. IX (April 1995), p. 48.

¹⁷⁸ *Divayina*. 13 July 1991 and 9 August 1991.

¹⁷⁹ K.Pieris, “Christian Politics and Tamil Separatism” in *The Island*, 2 February 2000, p. 18,20.

¹⁸⁰ G.P.V.Somaratna, “Beleaguered Christianity in Contemporary Sri Lanka” p. 48.

control funds flowing from abroad to missionary organisations engaged in converting poor Buddhist villagers to alien faiths by exploiting their poverty.”¹⁸¹ The Congress also warned the government that “if these anti-Buddhist activities are not checked, the Buddhists would rise against them very soon and that would be another clash, not second to the present ethnic problem.”¹⁸² In the same year, Buddhist leaders of all sects and several lay leaders met and made a proposal to the government. They wanted the state to have a ‘Buddha Sasana Ministry’ to take measures to foster Buddhism. They insisted that in all state and national activities Buddhism should be given the foremost place and not be assigned a position of mere equality with others. They also made a proposal whose effect would have been to stop the evangelistic work of the church:

All religionists other than Buddhists should receive the approval of a committee consisting of four representatives of the four *Mahanayakas*, and one representative each from Hindus, Muslims, Roman Catholics, and Protestants to set up a new place of worship in any part of the country. No place of worship should be allowed to function if a group does not have a congregation of at least one hundred people within an area of two miles. If such a place of worship was set up without the approval of this committee it should be demolished within three months and should not be entitled for compensation.¹⁸³

These proposals were presented to the government, and the commissioner of Buddhist Affairs informed the press that the Minister of Cultural Affairs had decided to introduce a bill aimed at preventing the emergence of new places of worship.¹⁸⁴ This particular bill was originally proposed by the government in 1963 and again in 1973. Yet, owing to the agitation made by certain leaders of the cabinet this measure was left in abeyance.¹⁸⁵ The proposal that conversion to other religions should be stopped has been put forward by the Buddhist leaders from time to time. In 1997 a proposal was brought forward to make

¹⁸¹ *Sunday Times*. 26 June 1988.

¹⁸² *Island*. 6 June 1988.

¹⁸³ G.P.V.Somaratna, “Beleaguered Christianity in Contemporary Sri Lanka” p. 52.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 52. The bill under review stipulated that a place of worship should have a congregation of at least 50 persons, and be at least 200 yards from an existing place of worship, especially if it was one of another religion.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 53.

constitutional changes.

However, there is still the provision that the freedoms of speech, peaceful assembly, and association (under which churches preach the gospel, assemble together, and form legally recognised bodies) could be restricted on the grounds of 'racial and religious harmony' (article 16 to 19 of the draft). This condition which has not been in any of the previous constitutions will enable anyone wishing to snuff out a church or obstruct the planting of a church to do so merely by creating disharmony in the neighbourhood. The majority religion will not be restricted by this in view of article 7, which obligates the state to promote and foster Buddhism.¹⁸⁶

Since Buddhists see the growth of the Christian church as an invasion of foreign influence that will eventually destroy Buddhism they have made several attempts to resist and even overthrow Christianity from the island. Rohan Ekanayake has documented such incidents in which Buddhist monks as well as the laity have tried to crush the progress of the church.¹⁸⁷ These include some churches that were closed down in 1977-1998 due to anti-Christian activities,¹⁸⁸ and places of worship that were set on fire by the opponents,¹⁸⁹ and other incidents in which pastors or Christian workers and believers were threatened or assaulted and church services disrupted.¹⁹⁰

(B) CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

In contemporary Sri Lanka seeking to convert Buddhists to Christianity is widely criticised as exploiting the poor and taking advantage of their poverty and living conditions. According to them, "conversion is an ugly word... It has all manner of undesirable associations, of force, of bribery and corruption, of denationalisation, of the exploitation of poverty and ignorance and greed, of disease and helplessness."¹⁹¹ The Buddhists exclaim:

¹⁸⁶ *Direction*. August 1977, p. 9.

¹⁸⁷ R. de S. Ekanayake, *Human Rights and the Christian Community in Sri Lanka*, Dehiwela: Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, 1998.

¹⁸⁸ Fourteen such incidents are listed by Ekanayake, *Ibid.* p. 39.

¹⁸⁹ According to Ekanayake, twenty Christian places of worship and centres have been burned down during the last eight years (*Ibid.* p. 55). Since Ekanayake mentions some churches that are situated in the Eastern province of the country where there is no Buddhist opposition, only a few places could be cited as the work of the Buddhist opponents.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 40-54.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in D.C. Wijewardena, *Revolt in the Temple*. Colombo: Sinha Publications, 1953, p. 502.

The campaign of converting boys and girls in cities and poor villages still continues in many subtle ways. In cities they are induced to become members of Christian social clubs, to attend holiday meetings, and picnics. These are all functioning under the guise of welfare and well wishing Christian societies to lure the young to mixed marriages through Christian friendships. Overseas Christian missions seemingly dedicated to help the remote villages with the promise of a better life are active to achieve their avowed purposes. Gifts in cash and kind are used as means to justify their biased intentions.¹⁹²

Buddhists depict such Christian activities as “converting the Buddhists with unethical means.” In contemporary Sri Lanka “unethical conversion is the allegation levelled against evangelical Christian organisations.”¹⁹³ It has been often pointed out that “Christians... [win] converts by bribing them with financial and other inducements.”¹⁹⁴ The Annual Report of the YMBA (1989-1990) has stated that “the subtle proselytising campaign was still going on. The methods used were insidious. They involve giving money and other inducements to inveigle innocent and poverty stricken Buddhists into changing their religion. Funds were coming in from foreign lands to promote this anti-Buddhist activity.”¹⁹⁵ Buddhists also point out that “an important aspect of contemporary Christian conversion in Sri Lanka is the introduction of aggressive conversion by a series of predominantly American sects.”¹⁹⁶ They severely condemn “the increasing infiltration of western Christian missionaries, through NGOs supposedly working towards lifting economic standards of the poor, while in fact striving at every turn to convert Asian Buddhists to Christianity through offers of material inducement.”¹⁹⁷ The Buddhists accuse the Christian churches and organisations saying:

These religious sects are exploiting certain economic weaknesses, such as poverty. Their very methods of conversion [court] hostility and suspicion. These sects are misusing freedom of speech, tax concessions, and the land granted by the government.

¹⁹² N.Wijesekera, *The Sinhalese*. Colombo: M.D.Gunasena & Company Ltd., 1990, p. 104.

¹⁹³ H.Pieris, “Christianity and the Ethic of Conversion” in *Daily News*. 13 February 1999, p. 4.

¹⁹⁴ A.Fernando, “A Light in Buddha’s Shadow” p. 63.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in K.Pieris, “Christian Conversion in Buddhist Sri Lanka” in *The Island*. 8 March 2000, p. 20.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁹⁷ *The Island*. 26 December 1999, p. 18.

They are engaged in a despicable, treacherous, indecent and massive assault on Buddhism.¹⁹⁸

In 1988 the government appointed a commission to inquire into the activities of the NGOs that received funds from overseas.¹⁹⁹ The Buddhists expected the commission to collect information regarding the allegations about Christian NGOs and make necessary recommendations to the government to prevent the conversion of Sinhalese to Christianity.²⁰⁰ It should be noted, however, that the majority of the Buddhists assert that they are not against 'genuine' or 'proper conversion'. It is their contention that "if by becoming a convinced convert to Christianity anyone becomes a better person, so much the better and all should welcome it."²⁰¹ They would say:

We believe that every individual is entitled to decide what his or her religion should be in a free and fair atmosphere. We also believe that adherents of one religion are entitled to publicise to those of other faiths the tenets of their own religion, an attempt to persuade the latter that the religion of the former is superior, or represents the truth, and should be followed. However, we believe that this activity (proselytism) should be carried out in a manner which is not an invasion of privacy, or a nuisance.²⁰²

The Buddhists allege that today's Christian conversions do not happen in this way:

These are not conversions through conviction but through enticement with the offer of food, shelter, and clothing to the poverty stricken among whom the NGOs and other groups engaged in this type of conversion are having a field day. This is what is unacceptable in the ongoing proselytising campaign. Conversion by conviction is, without question, a legitimate exercise, but taking unfair advantage of the poverty-stricken cannot be justified in any way. In the result it will be countervailing too.²⁰³

Buddhists also point out that their own missionary activity is different from that of Christian evangelism. According to them, Christian evangelism is "aggressive"²⁰⁴ in contrast to Buddhist propaganda. They remark, "as for Buddhist missionaries, they only

¹⁹⁸ From C.de S.Wijesundera's testimonies before the NGO commission, Cf. *The Island* 12 August 1993.

¹⁹⁹ *Sunday Times*. 25 September 1988.

²⁰⁰ *The Island*. 24 January 1990.

²⁰¹ H.P.Abeyasekera, *Some Colourful Cameos of Sri Lankan Life*, p. 103.

²⁰² S.Basnayake & S.Wijewardene, "Christianity & the Ethics of Conversion" in *Daily News*. 22 Feb. 1999

²⁰³ H.P.Abeyasekera, *Some Colourful Cameos of Sri Lankan Life*. p. 103.

²⁰⁴ Kamalika Pieris, "Christian Conversion in Buddhist Sri Lanka" p. 22.

expound the *Dhamma* to their audiences and leave it to them to make further inquiries and follow the Buddhist path to salvation, if it had their intellectual acceptance... 'Accept only if you are convinced' was the exhortation of the Buddha."²⁰⁵ The Buddhist missionaries in various countries "open a mission and let interested persons come in voluntarily without any rewards or inducements."²⁰⁶

Contemporary Buddhist attitudes concerning Christianity and its evangelism reveal that the Buddhists still think of Christianity as an alien western religion, and a threat to Buddhism. Buddhists have not forgotten the colonial past, which bring bitter memories and resentment towards Christianity. The superior attitude of the Buddhists concerning their religion is the direct consequence of the victory the Buddhists achieved in the nineteenth-century controversies. Since the controversies the Buddhists have concluded that the theistic concepts of Christianity are intellectually unacceptable theories and unscientific primitive concepts. The wide spread myth of Jesus' Indian visit has reduced him to a mere student of Buddhism. Above all, the infiltration of western culture has created an unwelcome atmosphere to Christianity. Hence, in such a context, Christian evangelism needs to be sensitive to the ethos of the Buddhists who had bitter and cruel experiences of Christianity in the past. The contemporary Christian church has to take into account the whole history of the colonial rule of the country, the missionary criticisms of Buddhism, and contemporary aggressive evangelism by certain Christian groups and the Buddhist response to it, before taking any fresh steps to relate to the Buddhists. The controversies and their counterproductive consequences are a constant reminder that confronting a religion with denunciation only brings bitterness and enmity between the people of different faiths and distorts the true message of those religions to others.

²⁰⁵ H.P. Abeyasekera, *Some Colourful Cameos of Sri Lankan Life*, p. 103.

²⁰⁶ Felix Fernando, "Proselytes-Children of Hell?" in *Sunday Observer*. 23 June 1991, p. 36.

CONCLUSION

A CHRISTIAN REFLECTION UPON THE CONTROVERSIES

The outcome of the nineteenth-century Buddhist-Christian controversies was counterproductive as far as the Christians were concerned. As the preceding chapters have indicated, Christians were disappointed in their hope to see many converts from Buddhism and contrary to their objectives, they had actually helped the Buddhists to revive their religion. Consequently, Christianity was undermined by the negative attitudes that had developed in the minds of many Buddhists. This conclusion explores some issues that the nineteenth-century controversies raise that are relevant to the contemporary situation in Sri Lanka and similar contexts.

1. THE INAPPROPRIATENESS OF POLEMIC IN INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER

A major aspect of the nineteenth-century controversies was the use of destructive criticism that both parties unhesitatingly used to undermine their opponents' religion. As far as Christian mission is concerned, it inevitably brings the question of the reasonableness or appropriateness of criticising and even condemning other religions. Many missionaries of the colonial era were accustomed to condemning all religious systems other than their own and attributing them to Satan or falsehood. In Sri Lanka, Christian propaganda prior to the debates as well as the debates themselves bear witness to this derogatory method in mission.¹ Such activities still prevail among certain sections of evangelical and mainline churches in Sri Lanka, and attempts are made to defend such a polemical mentality.

¹ Cf. Chapters One and Two.

“Narrow exclusivism and a conversion-oriented evangelism rooted in the militant vocabulary of battle”² are their general characteristics. They often argue that there is nothing wrong or inappropriate in condemning Buddhism and other non-Christian religions citing incidents from the Bible.³ However, such condemnation in the Bible was not aimed at converting the people of other faiths. It was mainly addressed to the Jews (in OT) and Christians (in NT) to discourage them from turning to other gods. Therefore biblical condemnation of idolatry ought not to be used as a precedent or an excuse for criticising non-Christian religions in order to convert adherents of these faiths.

According to the Bible all religions are nothing other than human responses to divine revelation even when they do not conform to the Judeo-Christian standards.⁴ They are “a mixture of human response and divine revelation.”⁵ As the Bible declares, and human experience demonstrates, people are religious because of the intuitive awareness they have regarding the divine.⁶ This innate knowledge is due to the divine image within the constitution of human beings,⁷ and the divine self-disclosure in human conscience.⁸ Human religions do have diabolical and immoral aspects, but they are due to the sin, ignorance and fallibility that are inherent in human nature. Nevertheless, people with all their errors and evils seek God in response to divine revelation, and it is the responsibility of Christians to recognise this religious instinct without condemning it and attributing

² E.J.Harris, “Of Conversion and Evangelism: Reflections from Sri Lanka” in *World Faiths Encounter*, 10 (March 1995), p. 8.

³ The author has encountered such attitudes in personal conversations with evangelical Christians in Sri Lanka. These standpoints can be witnessed in contemporary evangelical gospel presentations.

⁴ According to Romans chapter 1 idolatry and immorality are the natural consequences of the total or partial rejection of the divine revelation.

⁵ C.Wright, *Thinking Clearly About the Uniqueness of Jesus*. Crowborough: Monarch Publications, 1997, p. 109.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 3:11 speaks about the divine work in human hearts.

⁷ The Bible explicitly states that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Though the Fall has affected the divine image to a considerable extent (Genesis 3), it is not totally destroyed by human sin but distorted because of it. Even after the fall human beings are depicted as possessors of the divine image (Genesis 9:6, James 3:9).

⁸ According to Psalm 19:1, Romans 1:18-20 God has revealed himself both in creation and in human conscience. Paul says that the non-Jewish communities had divine laws inscribed in their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). The similarities between the ethical precepts of Moses and Hamurabi were also due to this phenomenon.

everything in other religions to Satan. In this respect, the greatest apostle of Christianity, Paul set an excellent example in Athens. Although that city was full of idols, and idolatry was condemned by God, and whilst Paul was greatly distressed by the religious practices of the people,⁹ instead of condemning them, he commended their religious observances.¹⁰ Paul was not endorsing or sanctioning idolatry, but neither was he approaching the non-Christians with a polemical mentality similar to that of the missionaries of the colonial era and many contemporary evangelical minded Christians in Sri Lanka. In Paul's approach, "we have a respectful recognition of religious endeavours,"¹¹ for it was "a cultured compliment to the distinguished audience."¹² Such a positive attitude and broadmindedness are vital when encountering the people of other faiths.¹³

The nineteenth-century missionary condemnation of Buddhism illustrates the strength of polemical attitudes in Enlightenment Christianity when it is contrasted with the Buddhists who did not criticise Christianity when it was introduced in Sri Lanka. The Buddhists claim that in the 2500 years of history of Buddhism "conversion by compulsion was unknown and repugnant to the Buddha and his disciples."¹⁴ According to them "there is no record ... of any persecution by the Buddhists of the followers of any other faiths"¹⁵ in contrast to the Crusades, which darkened the history of Christianity, or the religious

⁹ Acts 17:16.

¹⁰ Acts 17:22.

¹¹ W.J.Larkin, *Acts: The IVP New Testament Commentary*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1995, p. 255.

¹² J.D.G.Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles: Epworth Commentaries*. Peterborough: Epworth Press, p. 234.

¹³ In Acts 17:22 the Greek word translated as 'religious' (*deisidaimonesterous*) could be used either in good or bad sense. The KJV rendering 'Ye are too superstitious' implies criticism. Hence "it is an unlikely way to start a evangelistic speech" (A.Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999, p. 475). F.F.Bruce, however, citing an ancient writer Lucian, says, it cannot be a complimentary expression, for "it was forbidden to use complimentary exordia in addressing the Areopagus court, with the hope of securing its goodwill" (F.F.Bruce, *The Books of Acts: The New International Commentary on the NT*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 355). Nevertheless, we cannot be certain on how far Paul was abiding by this prohibition and the NIV rendering is more positive. Moreover, the Athenians' reputation for religious piety is well attested (W.J.Larkin, *Acts: The IVP New Testament Commentaries*, p. 255). Hence Paul was expressing commendation in his address, as K.Grayston has pointed out, "to provide a way into his address that would engage the attention of the audience" (Quoted in I.H.Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 285).

¹⁴ Piyadassi Thera, *The Buddha's Ancient Path*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 22.

persecution under the banner of reformation and colonial governments. Contemporary Sri Lankan Christians need to recognise that the moral code that the Buddha expounded was similar to the ethical codes of the Bible. Furthermore, the theology of the missionaries was systematised by utilising Greek philosophy, which is a human ideology similar to Buddhist doctrines. It is clearly unreasonable to attribute Eastern philosophy to Satan and Western philosophy to God. If the missionaries had acknowledged and appreciated the religious aspirations of the Buddhists, they may have received a more positive response to their missionary activities. This lesson is paramount in the present-day context of Sri Lanka where the majority of the Buddhists still feel the wounds made by the missionaries during the colonial era, wounds that are worsened by contemporary evangelicals.¹⁶ It is not an exaggeration to say, despite the denial of evangelicals,¹⁷ that the contemporary opposition, and the so-called persecution that the Christian Church is experiencing in Sri Lanka, is mainly due to the harsh criticism of Buddhism made by certain sections of the Christian community. The controversies and their consequences ought to remind them that condemning other religions will do more harm to their own mission than to other religions.

Contemporary Christians need to understand Buddhist sensitivities towards their religion. A recent illustration of this comes from the response the Buddhists gave to the Pope when he visited Sri Lanka in January 1995. Initially there was no hint of controversy about the visit of the Pope to Sri Lanka. The leading Buddhist monks prepared a statement welcoming the Pope, and the chief monks of the *Siyam Nikaya* agreed to go to Colombo to welcome him.¹⁸ A well-known monk had even agreed to design the open-air altar.¹⁹ Chief monks do not customarily go out from their temples in Kandy to Colombo to welcome heads of state or religious leaders. Even the President of Sri Lanka goes to the temples in

¹⁶ Contemporary Christian evangelism in Sri Lanka follows the footsteps of the missionaries of the colonial era, with the exception of those who prefer a dialogical approach to inter-faith encounters.

¹⁷ Such denials were discovered in personal conversations with some evangelical Christians and by personal observation.

¹⁸ *The Island*. 18 December 1994.

¹⁹ *Daily News*. 23 January 1995.

Kandy to be received by the monks. Hence, their agreement to go to Colombo was an act of exceptional courtesy. However, when the Buddhists came to know about the protest that Buddhists in London had made against the Pope's comments about Buddhism in his recent book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*,²⁰ the chief monks decided not to participate in the ceremonies to welcome the Pope or to participate in the inter-religious dialogue scheduled for the morning of the second day of his visit unless he apologised for making the critical comments on Buddhism.²¹ The Catholic Church pleaded with the monks on behalf of the Pope. The Archbishop of Colombo sent a letter to the chief monks stating that they could be 'assured that the Pope had no intention whatsoever of criticising their doctrines or hurting the feelings of the Buddhist brethren.' They [Bishops of Sri Lanka] 'do realise that the feelings of the Buddhists have been deeply hurt by some of the contents of this publication', and they expressed their deep regret to the Buddhists.²² The Pope's secretary, on behalf of the Pope, also said that they were all truly saddened.²³ The Bishop of Colombo went to the extent of pointing out that the Pope had also said positive things about Buddhism.²⁴ The Catholic bishops also argued that the statement by the Pope had been taken out of 'its general context', and pointed out that the Pope himself had expressed sadness about hurt feelings that had been caused.²⁵ But nothing changed the minds of the Buddhists. They felt that the Pope had made 'an incorrect interpretation of Buddhism', and pointed out that the Vatican is 'not withdrawing it, but have said they feel sorry' and this was 'not acceptable.'²⁶ Subsequently, arsonists damaged a statue, and set fire to a crib at a Catholic church in Raddoluwa, 15 miles north of Colombo, and the following day three

²⁰ This news was published in *The Island*. 21 November 1994.

²¹ The Pope had stated that Buddhism had a 'negative soteriology' and claimed that Buddhism viewed the world as an evil place and defined the Buddhist ideal of *Nibbana* as 'a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world'. (Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vitorio Messori, New York: AK, 1994, p. 85-86).

²² *Daily News*. 23 December 1994.

²³ *The Island*. 8 January 1995.

²⁴ *Sunday Leader*. 8 January 1995.

²⁵ *Daily News*. 12 January 1995.

²⁶ *The Sunday Times*. 15 January 1995.

Buddhist statues were set on fire in the same town.²⁷ Several posters appeared in Colombo protesting against the Papal visit.²⁸ And finally, the day before the Pope was due to arrive, monks went out in procession to the Presidential Secretariat and demanded a cancellation of the visit, warning that one of the monks would die by self-immolation if the visit was not cancelled, or if the Pope failed to withdraw his remarks and tender an apology.²⁹ Therefore, by criticising or condemning Buddhism, Christians in Sri Lanka will only provoke further opposition just as they did in the nineteenth-century.

Whilst a polemical mentality is not an appropriate attitude when approaching people of other faiths, positive criticism is vital for a meaningful interfaith encounter. For it will enable the people concerned to evaluate their faith and practice and make necessary changes or corrections in order to relate to people of other religions in a proper and decent manner. Unwillingness to accept such criticism inevitably prevents a person from relating to people of other faiths. Hence the criticism now being directed against the missionaries of the colonial era should open the minds of contemporary Sri Lankan Christians to see the cause of their unfruitful attempts to relate to non-Christians. Likewise, contemporary Buddhists in Sri Lanka also need to consider the criticisms that are directed against their religious leaders, doctrines and ritual observances without simply rejecting them. As the above-mentioned episode of the visit of the Pope points out, the contemporary Buddhist mind is unwilling to hear anything negative about their religious precepts and practices. The rejection and condemnation which greeted Stanley J. Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri-Lanka*³⁰ is further evidence of such Buddhist attitudes. Tambiah has accused the Buddhist monks of responsibility for the recent ethnic violence in the country. The monks' response to this publication was total rejection and

²⁷ *Ibid.* 15 January 1995.

²⁸ The posters read: "We challenge the Pope to prove his statements," "We are opposed to the Pope who has criticised Buddhism," and "The Pope should apologise to Buddhists."

²⁹ *Divaina*. 20 January 1995.

³⁰ Published in Chicago & London by the University of Chicago Press in 1992.

condemnation. If the monks had been willing to consider Tambiah's criticisms and make some response, they could have avoided the severe castigations of H.L.Seneviratne and gained a good reputation.³¹ Christians also need to understand from this that willingness to receive criticism from others is vital for their own improvement and ability to relate to people of other faiths in a meaningful way.

2. THE NEED FOR A NEW SPIRIT IN INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER

Another lesson that emerges from the nineteenth-century Buddhist-Christian controversies is related to the attitudes of the Christians who are engaged in mission work. It has been often pointed out that Christian evangelism from the colonial era to the present time is aggressive and Christians are very adamant in their dealings with the non-Christians. Even today in Sri Lanka many Christians still attribute Buddhism to the devil. As the fourth chapter has indicated, Christians are accused of engaging in programmes of unethical conversion.³² Further, the opposition and even the so-called persecution that Christian mission encounters in contemporary Sri Lanka are mainly due to the intolerant and adamant attitudes and activities of the Christians who are engaged in evangelistic work. It cannot be denied that in Sri Lanka "insensitive evangelism is taking place... The mainline churches blame independent groups for this but there are strong evangelical elements within the mainline Protestant denominations."³³ Christians need to understand that the Buddhists have not forgotten their colonial past which most Christians are accustomed to disregard or ignore. Contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism has its roots in the nineteenth-century revival which drew much of its strength from Buddhist reaction to the anti-Buddhist activities of the Christians which culminated in the controversies. From that time

³¹ Cf. H.L.Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

³² Cf. Chapter Four, p. 159-161.

³³ E.J.Harris, "Of Conversion and Evangelism: Reflection from Sri Lanka" p. 4.

onwards Buddhist activities were directly or indirectly influenced and even inspired by the controversies and the subsequent Buddhist revival.³⁴ As far as the Buddhists are concerned the colonial heritage of contemporary Christian mission is unfitting to the religious ethos of the country. Therefore it is necessary for Christians whose theology emphasises repentance, to repent of their colonial attitude and express the true spirit of Christ in all their activities.

Acknowledging the sins of a nation or a community is nothing new to the Christian Bible. The Old Testament contains many instances in which the leaders acknowledged and repented of the sins of their forefathers or contemporaries. Since Christian treatment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was wrong, an appeal was made in 1969 to the Christians to recognise the dark side of their history and make a public act of repentance.³⁵ Considering the nineteenth-century missionary activities, it was pointed out in 1997 that “repentance for this sad history was the only way forward”³⁶ for the Christians in Sri Lanka. It is sad that this important advice has been totally ignored by many Christians who continue to follow their colonial forefathers in aggressive or polemical evangelism. The nineteenth-century controversies are a reminder to contemporary Christians that argumentative and aggressive forms of evangelism are unfitting to the message of Christ, a message saturated with undeserved love to humanity.

3. THE NEED FOR A NON-CONFRONTATIONAL MISSIOLOGY

The nineteenth-century controversies also remind the need for a non-confrontational missiology in contemporary interfaith encounter. It is sad that many who have realised the

³⁴ Cf. Chapter Four, pp. 126-129.

³⁵ This appeal was made by T. Balasuriya in *Daily News* 11 May 1969, Quoted in E.J. Harris, “Building Friendship between Buddhists and Christians: An Exploration” in *Tissa Balasuriya Felicitation Volume*, Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1997, p. 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 38.

need to repent have ignored, or not realised, or even rejected the need to communicate the message of Christianity to non-Christians. In contemporary Sri Lanka, most of the churches that were established during the colonial period have distanced themselves from the newly emerged evangelical and charismatic churches and have gone to the extent of denying the need to communicate the message of Christianity to people of other faiths and even condemning the evangelistic activities of the newly established churches.³⁷ Some have adopted a dialogical approach, which tries to bring a mutual understanding between the Christians and people of other faiths, perhaps sometimes even at the expense of the unique aspects and characteristics of both religions. As an example of this approach, Lynn de Silva made an attempt to express Christian concepts in Buddhist terminology.³⁸ His contention was that the “Christian message could be commended to Buddhists on the basis of a theological structure oriented to the conceptual frame work of Buddhism.”³⁹ Hence he argued “Asian Christian theology should begin where Buddhism begins,”⁴⁰ and took the Buddha’s discovery of the three marks of human predicament, *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (soul-lessness or selflessness), and *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness or suffering) as the fundamental characteristics of all existence and the proper starting point of Christian theology in a Buddhist context. Since traditional Christian theology’s theistic starting point may sound incomprehensible to the non-theistic Buddhist mind, de Silva’s attempt to begin

³⁷ The Roman Catholic Church and certain sections of Anglican and Methodist churches expressed such views when the government appointed a commission to investigate the activities of the NGO’s and the accusation of unethical conversion.

³⁸ L.de Silva, a Methodist minister of Sri Lanka, was actively involved in promoting Christian-Buddhist dialogue for three decades until his death in 1981. He served as the director of the Ecumenical Institute in Colombo. It was de Silva who introduced Buddhist studies as well as Buddhist-Christian dialogue as a central concern of the institute. De Silva proposed to use the Buddhist term *dhmma* to “present Jesus Christ as saviour in a way that his image will appeal to the existential yearnings of a Buddhist who is proud of his cultural heritage (“Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists” in *International Review of Mission*, LVII [Oct.1968], p. 451-452).

³⁹ Ibid. p. 449. Among de Silva’s various publications, *Emergent Theology in the Context of Buddhism* (Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 1979) contains his seminal theological contribution. It appeared in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*, D.J.Elwood ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1990 under the same title, and the present dissertation cites from this American edition. It has also appeared in other publications with minor modifications as his theological manifesto. Cf. “Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists” in *International Review of Mission*, LVII (October 1968); “Rethinking Theology in the Context of Buddhism” in *Dialogue*, VI (January-August 1979); “Theological construction in a Buddhist Context” in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, Anderson, ed., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976.

⁴⁰ L.de Silva, “Emergent Theology in the Context of Buddhism” p. 223.

his theology where the Buddha had begun is commendable and should become the norm for Christian missiology in a Buddhist context. However, even though de Silva's missiological construction has valuable insights, his thesis as a whole is not satisfactory for he ends up by giving Buddhist meanings to Christian concepts and harmonises both religious concepts in a syncretistic way,⁴¹ instead of communicating the Christian message to the Buddhists.⁴²

Prior to de Silva, Daniel T. Niles had made an attempt to present the Christian message to the Sri Lankan Buddhists, by employing Buddhist concepts and terminology.⁴³ In recent times Tissa Weerasingha has made a similar attempt.⁴⁴ Christians need to be cautious in using such missiological constructions, for a major disadvantage in employing non-Christian terms in Christian messages is their susceptibility to being misunderstood. Since non-Christians are familiar with these terms they will understand them according to their own contexts and meanings. They may not get the intended meaning of the Christian preacher. For instance, it may seem helpful to use the term 'rebirth' instead of 'regeneration' when conversing with a Buddhist. Christians may assume that the term rebirth will convey the ideas that are intended by the Christian concept of regeneration. But the Buddhists will not comprehend the Christian concept of regeneration from the term 'rebirth' without a detailed explanation. The Buddhist mind will naturally ponder about the endless cycles of births and deaths whenever they hear the term 'rebirth'.⁴⁵ Hence, in order

⁴¹ For instance, he argues that the Bible also teaches the doctrine of *anatta*, i.e. people do not have an eternal soul. He also equates the Buddhist concept of rebirth with Christian hope of resurrection. And his theory of progressive sanctification almost teaches universalism. (Cf. Ibid. pp. 10-36).

⁴² The present author has examined de Silva's theology in *Christian Mission and its Christological Messages: An Examination and Evaluation of Selected Asian Attempts to Communicate the Christian Faith in Buddhist and Hindu Contexts*, Unpublished MA Dissertation, Ware: All Nations Christian College, 1997.

⁴³ Cf. D.T.Niles, *Eternal Life Now: A Presentation of the Christian Faith to the Buddhists*. Colombo: Ceylon Printers, 1946.

⁴⁴ Cf. T.Weerasingha, *The Cross & the Bo Tree: Communicating the Gospel to Buddhists*. Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1989.

⁴⁵ Biblical narratives illustrate this well. For instance, Nicodemus found it difficult to understand what Jesus meant by 'born again.' He and his Jewish contemporaries argued that it was only the gentiles who needed a 'born again experience' to enter the Jewish community as new born babies. Being born into a Jewish family, Nicodemus thought that there was no need for him to have such an experience to see the kingdom of God. Thus he questioned Jesus' statement saying, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter

to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, it is necessary for the Christian communicator to avoid familiar terms.⁴⁶

In the nineteenth-century controversies, one of the criticisms levelled against the Christian missionaries was on such grounds. In the Panadura debate, Gunananda accused the Christians of deceiving non-Christians by adopting their religious terms and concepts. He pointed out, that in Calcutta, Christ was called son of *Iswara* with the view to enlisting the sympathies of the Hindus who held the god *Iswara* in great reverence. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Jehovah went by the name of '*dewiyanwahanse*' as this term existed amongst the Sinhalese to denote the gods in whom they believed. Even when de Silva explained that 'this was not with the view of deceiving the people, but the language could not offer any other better word,' Gunananda continued to insist that de Silva's answer was not true, and stated that 'the intention of the Christians was to deceive the Hindus.'⁴⁷ It is true that divine names cannot be rendered in other languages without using the common terminologies that connote divinity in those dialects. Nevertheless, employing the names or titles of other deities for Jesus is not a proper methodology for Christian mission in Sri Lanka, for it will be seen as another cunning device of the Christians to win adherence deceitfully. It will also give a wrong impression to the non-Christians about the personality of Jesus Christ, for they will attribute all the qualities and characteristics of their gods to

a second time into his mothers' womb to be born." (John 3:4). Similarly, the Samaritan woman misunderstood Jesus' words regarding the living water. In fact Jesus was speaking about the divine gift of salvation, which is conveyed by the Spirit. However, the woman understood Jesus' words literally and thought only about the well (John 4:11). Such examples could be multiplied and so extra caution and additional explanations are necessary when employing non-Christian terms and concepts in Christian message. For Jesus himself explained the terms he had employed in his conversation with Nicodemus and Samaritan woman in great detail (Cf. John 3:5-8, 4:13).

⁴⁶ An excellent example of this is the way the Tamil Bible translators rendered the Greek *ergon* in their translation. They "purposely avoided the word *karma* to translate the Greek *ergon* (deed), lest the original context of the word *karma* be brought to the memory of the reader" (D.Francis, *The Relevance of Hindu Ethos for Christian Presence: A Tamil Perspective*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1989, p. 10). So the term *Kriya* was preferred to *Karma*. Such kind of caution is necessary to avoid possible and potential misunderstandings.

⁴⁷ P.Abhayasundara, ed., *Controversy at Panadura*. Colombo: State Printing Corporation, pp. 63, 73-74.

him. It is better to use the names already in use (i.e. Jesus Christ and Jehovah) instead of adopting Buddhist or Hindu names for the sake of contextualisation.⁴⁸

In contemporary Sri Lanka Aloysius Pieris has contributed much to Buddhist-Christian dialogue.⁴⁹ Concluding that existing Asian Christologies “are all out of place in Asia”⁵⁰ Pieris insists that Asian Christian theology as well as the Church must be baptised in the “Jordan of Asian Religions” and crucified in the “Calvary of Asian poverty.”⁵¹ By this dictum Pieris has made an appeal to Christians to give up their colonial identity and submit their theologies to the judgement of other non-Christian soteriologies and socialism.⁵² In recent times, however, rejecting syncretism and synthesis as violations of the unique identity of each religion, he has ventured to develop a mutual relationship between Buddhists and Christians to learn from and edify each other. Depicting this process as ‘symbiosis’ Pieris remarks that in such an engagement people of one religion expose themselves to another religion and in the process learn more about what is significant and unique in their own tradition through the judgements and witness of the other.⁵³ Evangelical Christians may reject such a proposal, but Christians can and should learn

⁴⁸ In contemporary Sri Lanka some efforts have been made to use Buddhist names and concepts to contextualise the Christian message. It is suggested that Buddha could be a name for Christ in Buddhist contexts and Buddhist terminologies could be employed to express Christian truths. Therefore, the Ceylon Bible Society has rendered the Greek term *Logos* in a recent Sinhalese version of the Fourth Gospel as *Dharma*. Lynn de Silva, who had already proposed to use this Buddhist term to “present Jesus Christ in a way that his image will appeal to the existential yearnings of a Buddhist who is proud of his cultural heritage”, was happy to endorse such attempts. It is his contention that “following the Johannine way, we could present Jesus Christ as the unique revealer of the eternal *Logos* just as the Buddhas are revealers of the eternal dharma. (“Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists” pp. 451-452). Similar approaches have been made in India by using Hindu concepts and terms. For instance, A.J.Appasamay believed that Christian faith could be interpreted in India using the categories of the Indian religious and philosophical tradition. He found parallels in Bhakti Hinduism to several Christian concepts, particularly to the union of the human and the divine in Christ; and to the relationship between divine immanence and transcendence. (Cf. A.J.Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study of the Johannine Doctrine of Love*. Madras: CLS, 1928).

⁴⁹ A. Pieris, the editor of the Dialogue since the death of L.de Silva, has contributed much to the liberation theology and Buddhist-Christian relationship. In 1974, he founded Tulana Research Centre to foster Buddhist-Christian understanding.

⁵⁰ A.Pieris, “Does Christ Have a Place in Asia? A Panoramic View” in *Any Room for Christ in Asia?*” Leonard Boff & Virgil Elizondo ed., London/Maryknoll: SCM Press/Orbis Books, 1993.

⁵¹ A.Pieris’ theology is found in *Asian Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988, and *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996.

⁵² An evangelical critique of A.Pieris’ theology is made in V.Ramachandara, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996, pp. 38-70.

⁵³ A.Pieris, “Inculturation in Asia: A Theological Reflection on an Experience” in *Concilium*, (November-December 1994).

about their own faith and enrich their spirituality by such encounters with Buddhists and vice versa. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that Christianity is not just a learning process. The intrinsic nature of Christianity is its fundamental obligation to express its unique message to the non-Christian as well.

In any dialogical approach, the tendency is to discover and affirm the commonness of the different faiths with the hope of bringing a mutual understanding and harmony between the diverse religious communities that are divided on the basis of religion. Such a process is vital and necessary for the mutual engagement of discovering the depths and the true nature of religions, but such an endeavour should also challenge the people involved to evaluate their own religious concepts objectively and make changes to become better if necessary. In any inter-faith dialogue learning as well as teaching should occur in a reciprocal way. Such a process should begin on a common ground and proceed to discover the differences and if necessary borrow from the other side to complement one's own religious pursuit. It could, for example, be suggested that the message of the book of Ecclesiastes and the Four Noble Truths⁵⁴ of the Buddha should become an important topic in any Buddhist-Christian dialogical encounter. For both the Buddha and the author of the book of Ecclesiastes take a common and important subject to investigate and find out the root causes of the human predicament and propose solutions in their own cultural and religious contexts. With this subject, both Buddhists and Christians could engage in a common search to find out how both religions seek to solve the human predicament and follow whichever path they see appropriate.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The Four Noble Truths are the fundamentals of Buddhism. This comes from the initial sermon of the Buddha after his enlightenment known as *Dhamma-cakka-pavattana-sutta* (setting in motion the wheel of truth) and recorded in the *Samyutta-nikaya* LVI.

⁵⁵ The author has presented such a theological treatise elsewhere recently. Cf. *A Missiological Manifesto for the Sri Lankan Buddhist Context*. Unpublished Seminar Paper, Madras: Dharma Deepika Missiological Consultation, December 1999.

GLOSSARY OF PALI TERMS

<i>Anatta</i>	Soul-lessness or self-lessness.
<i>Anicca</i>	Impermanence.
<i>Atma</i>	Soul.
<i>Bana</i>	Buddhist sermon.
<i>Dhamma</i>	Teachings of the Buddha.
<i>Dharmasabha</i>	Preaching Hall.
<i>Dukkha</i>	Unsatisfactoriness or suffering.
<i>Jatakas</i>	Stories of the previous lives of the Buddha.
<i>Nibbana</i>	The ultimate goal of Buddhism.
<i>Paticcasamuppada</i>	Doctrine of dependent origination.
<i>Rahats</i>	Enlightened sages.
<i>Sangha</i>	The community of Buddhist monks.
<i>Samsara</i>	Round of rebirth.
<i>Skandhas</i>	The elements that constitute a being.
<i>Sutta</i>	A verse or a section of Buddhist text.
<i>Tanha</i>	Desire or craving, the root cause of human predicament.
<i>Tipitaka</i>	Three baskets of the Buddhist canon.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACBC	All Ceylon Buddhist Congress.
ANCC	All Nations Christian College.
BMS	Baptist Missionary Society.
BTS	Buddhist Theosophical Society.
CMS	Church Missionary Society.
LMS	London Missionary Society.
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies.
SPG	The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.
WMMS	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association.
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association.

APPENDIX I

BUDDHIST ADAPTATION OF A CHRISTIAN HYMN¹

THE BUDDHIST HYMN

Praise we the Holy DHARMA

The wisdom of our Lord

The Truth unchanged, unchanging

His own eternal Word

We praise Him for the radiance

That from its hallowed page

A lantern to our footsteps

Shines on from age to age

THE CHRISTIAN HYMN

O Word of God incarnate,

O Wisdom from on high,

O Truth unchanged, unchanging

O Light of our dark sky,

We praise Thee for the radiance,

That from the hallowed page,

A lantern to our footsteps

Shines on from age to age.

¹ The Buddhist hymn was composed by C.W.Leadbeater and published in *The Buddhist V* (13 January 1893). The original Christian version was written by William W.Howe and appears as the hymn 303 in the *Methodist Hymn Book*. This is cited in E.J.Harris, *Crisis, Competition and Conversion*, p. 617.

CHRISTIAN TRACTS

The first handbill was entitled *Important Information* and had the following text: "We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or be that are called gods, (as there be gods many and lords many), but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him."

The second was entitled 'News from Heaven', and contained the text John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The third was 'Divine Instruction,' containing the text 1 Timothy 2:3: "There is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all."

The fourth was "An important enquiry", pointing out the "grand difference" between Christians and heathens regarding the objects of their worship.

(Documented in W.J.T.Small, *A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon*, p. 75).

BUDDHIST PARODIES

"We know that there is NO God who is the giver of all good, and who lives for ever, existing in time past, present and to come, and that none but Buddha is the creator and donor of all sorrow-destroying tranquillity."

"The present Buddha before he attained to Buddhahood, so much, or so infinitely pitied Maraya and all beings that, resolving to become Buddha, he came down from heaven, and though on approaching the seat of Buddhahood his design was opposed by the deva Maraya and his host, yet, having conquered and put him to flight, he became supreme Buddha, that all who believe in him might not perish, but obtain the happiness of nirwana."

"He who delights in the glorious sermons of the all-wise Buddha, more divine than the gods, who receives no false doctrine, and who perseveres in the performance of the ten meritorious actions, shall obtain divine and human enjoyment, with all other eternal blessings."

"What is the difference between the true believer and the believer in the false religion? The believer in the false religion credits the following falsehoods, namely, that there are no former births, and that after we pass by death from this world there will be no future births, and that all who have died and been laid in their graves shall rise at once at a certain appointed time, all going to one heaven or to one hell, will there enjoy everlasting misery or enjoy eternal happiness, and that afterwards this world will have no existence. But the true believer confides in the declaration of the all-wise Buddha, and believes that, as he is taught, all men will receive that kind and degree of suffering and enjoyment which agrees with the merit or demerit of their conduct".

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